



UNIVERSITY OF  
LIVERPOOL

**THE VALUE OF DISTANCE: ART'S  
CULTURAL IDENTITY AMIDST  
TECHNOLOGY'S  
TRANSFORMATIONS OF SPACE**

By

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## ABSTRACT

### THE VALUE OF DISTANCE: ART'S CULTURAL IDENTITY AMIDST TECHNOLOGY'S TRANSFORMATIONS OF SPACE

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This study explores technology's propensity to transform our comprehensions of space, considering the implications of this for our understandings of the work of art and the value that we ascribe to it. With our encounters increasingly a by-product of technological interface, the central question of this work is posed as follows:

*In what ways (and to what degree) may we regard the contemporary conditions facing the art object (and the values that these elicit) as a consequence of our prevailing technological landscape and its capacity to re-configure our conceptions of space and place?*

In confronting this, the study begins by surveying recent public justifications made for the arts and the criteria by which their value is ascertained. A trend is recognised, in the growing prevalence of instrumental qualifiers for art's worth (its quantifiable impacts as a social utility) and a shift away from intrinsic measures. In response to this, I propose the concept of *Accumulative Value*, arguing that the totality of an art object's intellectual considerations and explorations (over historical time) are an intrinsic attribute of the object itself and a qualifier of its objective worth.

The notion of value itself (with its varying interpretations) is then explored, followed by a contemporary re-evaluation of Walter Benjamin's concept of the *aura*, arguing that in our present circumstances this notion may be used in description of an object's fixed spatial locality. The degree to which technologies of telepresence undermine such locality is then examined, noting trends in technological progression toward an abolition of *distance*, in both a spatial and temporal sense, that diminish our ability to recognise *Accumulative Value*.

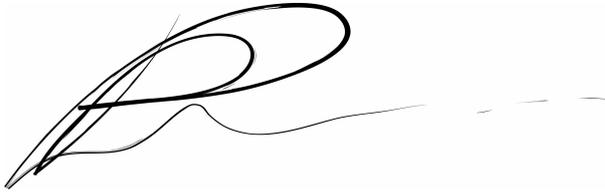
In consummation, it is proposed that technologies, as *Competitive Cognitive Artefacts*, may play a role in manifesting a situation in which the intrinsic measures of art's worth are progressively disregarded, yet, that the auric artwork can come to fulfil a timely imperative, in reconnecting us to a somatic relationship with space and a linear understanding of time; such perceivable phenomena that are jeopardised by technological transformations.

## DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this thesis constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions or writings of another.

I declare that the thesis describes original work that has not previously been presented for the award of any other degree of any institution.

Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'D. H. Ogle', written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned above a horizontal line that extends to the right.

David Hadlow Ogle

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## PREFACE TO THE VALUE OF DISTANCE

The following text (composed during the early stages of the PhD) is included here as an overarching polemic on the nature of value. Its intent is to assert the author's positions on this topic, to explore these through allegory and to offer a 'library' of imagery for the reader that will be called-upon during the subsequent commentaries in this thesis.

*A version of this text was delivered at the interdisciplinary conference 'Moving Mountains: Studies in Place, Society and Cultural Representation', University of Edinburgh, June 2014.*

### **After the Ascent**

#### **The climb**

From what origin is that *will* which drives man to scale the highest of peaks? To endanger survival, over ridge and cliff and precipice; striving for the promise of the summit. For the summit is of no value in the material sense, indeed it is where material terminates, beyond it, only the blue dome of sky arcing above the zenith. Up in the rarefied atmosphere there exists this nothingness, one that our species will endure colossal hardship in order to reach. Why should this be so, what meaning and significance is there to be found here, and what can be learned about the impulses that motivate such acts? In conquering the summit nothing is gained, save for the feat of conquest itself, the knowledge advanced through this endeavour, and an expansive new aspect. At this pinnacle, above cloud, above all other material things, where air is thin and vision unmisted, exists a heightened perspective. The earth is held at a distance, examined, regarded, frames of reference *expanded*, and a new understanding, a new objectivity is allowed to emerge. We attain a quantity of omnipotence, seeing for one moment as though our physical limitations have been transcended; as one may have imagined the gaze of a deity, looking down upon the earth in ancient times. Within this, the worth of the summit

presents itself, not a product of the peak's material actuality, but of its *elevation*; that the summit is valueless without the mountain standing beneath it.

Value is a product of the climb, the knowledge gained through it allowing us to *know* the significance of the summit. What aspect of this action then are we attributing a sense of value to? For some, the journey may present a greater challenge than for others, and whilst the view from the summit remains a constant for all, the difficulty of its ascent rests upon the aptitude and conviction of the climber. The mountain endures, ever-present, unchanging, and as such, any variation in the exertion of the route stems from the individual. More than confronting the obstacle then, perhaps what we seek to strive against is our own limitations, as Everest pioneer Edmund Hillary once described, 'it is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves'. Why though should we wish to overcome our own bodily restraints in this way, *and* assign such value to the act of doing so? Perhaps, in the time of our early ancestors, this compulsion was beneficial to the survival instincts of the hunter-gatherer, the urge to push oneself against external, environmental forces.

However, as civilization dawns, as man's power is concentrated and control extended over both nature and other human beings, the ceaseless battle for survival begins to wane. Once survival is perennially assured, how can it possibly retain the weight of significance that it once held? It cannot, and as human lives become distended, as our dominion over the earth becomes absolute, the meaning and value that once elevated the basic instinct to survive fades into the background of everyday existence. It lays dormant, awakening in moments of crisis, but as humanity advances it is increasingly silent. As a species, the need to *value*, the desire to place a weight of importance upon *something* is perhaps a vestigial one. A remnant of that *significance* which was once reserved for our own survival, at a time when this was an endless struggle against an unforgiving environment and the cold indifference of the natural order. When food, shelter and safety from predators become presumed, such things that once held a powerful 'survival value' become of less meaning, their status less revered than it once was. Yet, perhaps the need to find value is one to which we have become naturally predisposed, and when survival value is diminished, the need for something else emerges to replace it – that which adds value *to* survival. We no longer hold aloft those things that give comfort and security to our continued existence, but those that enhance our experience of being alive.

Once the battle against the environment, against that which is external has been waged and won, we turn inwards, and the struggle begins once more, but now confronting the capabilities and limitations of ourselves. We strive for knowledge, power, revelling in that which is seen as sublime or transcendent. We devise methods to organise society in accordance with virtues of such uncontested *value* that we hold them to be self-evident, and create technologies that extend our physical and intellectual boundaries beyond recognition. We scale the summit of mountains where we once thought gods resided, and see aesthetic beauty in the rising sun, where once our ancestors rejoiced at an end to the perils of night.

### **Discovering fire**

Possessing even the smallest measure of control over the workings of the natural world drastically inflates the capabilities of those who wield it; disrupting patterns of behaviour which had previously been entirely environmentally dictated. Man's harnessing of fire (beginning perhaps 400,000 years ago) allowed heat and light to endure after the sun had set, radically altering the sleeping patterns of our ancestors, their dietary behaviours, and striking fear into previously formidable predators. It is perhaps in this discovery where our ancestors begin to command the forces of nature for their own benefit, and in doing so, start to drift away from prizing that which aids survival above all other things; the shifting of night into day losing the value that it once held. No longer a product of his environment, man begins to increasingly bend his habitat to his own will, utilising mechanisms of escalating complexity, from early stone tools to that which we would today define as technology. However, perhaps in doing so, man surpasses and undermines the workings of the natural order that have shaped his development and his conceptions of the world; the tools that he has made coming to re-shape *him*.

The heating and cutting of foods lead man to lose the crushing power of his primate jaw; the sling for carrying infants allows for extended periods of cranial development, where the ability is no longer necessary for a child to lift the weight of its own head so soon after birth, and the requirement for creating and wielding increasingly intricate tools dramatically advances manual dexterity in the hands. These tools come to define us as our natural habitats once did. Man surpasses the physical parameters

of this own body, manipulating the environments surrounding him in accordance with his own conception of self; one magnified by the powers of the technologies that he has harnessed.

But, within these burgeoning abilities, how is *value* altered, when man's experiences of the world are eased, mediated or wholly permitted by the technologies that he chooses to adopt? If, as was previously proposed, our assignment of *worth* stems from our innate attribution of a 'survival value' to certain entities, behaviours or situations, what implications might technology's interventions have for this? Perhaps, the need for a constant struggle (as our hunter-gatherer ancestors had against their environment) has become central to our understanding, even our definition of value, and technological assistance within activities that were once undertaken by man alone will always reduce the personal sense of value in achieving a goal under one's own power. The link between mind and body is important to note within this, and as technologies become of ever-increasing efficiency and physical capacity, perhaps man is rendered unable to physically relate to the operations that they effortlessly carry out. A distance is imposed, between an objective and its goal, between a starting point and a destination; a mountain which technology climbs *on our behalf*.

Yet, value remains a product the climb itself. Even when the fight for survival has been won, we continue to attribute degrees of significance to our experiences based upon the difficulties that they have posed to us. Religious pilgrimages assert the worth of the journey and the sacrifices that this can entail, the destination merely an incitement and arbitrary by comparison. Innumerable tribal rituals, trials and initiations from across the world and across ages demonstrate a consistent will to impose a struggle, that in some way this has a revelatory or transformative potential, strengthening the character of those who undertake it. At 8 years old, boys of the Vanuatu tribe of the South Pacific hurl themselves from suspended platforms hundreds of feet in the air, rejecting their innermost instincts for survival and willingly falling of their own volition; those who survive attaining the tribes mark of acceptance. Just as the Sawau tribe of the Fijian Islands (amongst many others), practice the art of fire walking, willingly striding into flames; the commanded fire that once saw our ancestor's predators fleeing from them is turned back upon its keeper, becoming a self-imposed means of revealing one's worth. Survival is deliberately endangered in such acts, as a means for the creation and revelation of

value, yet, even when our existence is not at stake, it appears that what we most attach value to remains that which has demanded struggle, toil and sacrifice to attain.

It is only in the cold and darkness of night where fire is at its most powerful, its most valuable, only in silence where a sound can pierce the air, only in the valley where the mountain can rise above, there is a co-dependence between these opposites, they are dualities of being that are tightly bound to once another. As such, perhaps we may argue that to perceive something as being of value, to have a sense of affinity and *nearness* to it requires a *distance* to be crossed; we cannot truly *know* that which at-hand without seeing it objectively from afar, and fighting our way toward it. Man desires most that which he does not have, only he who lives under servile oppression can truly know the *value* of his own liberty; we look into the distance, to the promise of the summit, to the hope of our own ascent.

### **Beyond the horizon**

The summit is defined by the strata upon which it rests and the nothingness that exists above, the horizon line between earth and sky, between the concrete physical distance climbed and the abstracted infinity of space. Man looks out to sea, to the horizon, staring into this void, pulled by the promise of that which lies beyond. It is perhaps the most common confrontation that we have with the infinite, with the immaterial, looking out to a seemingly endless sea or up into the ether, the potentiality of this infinity is one that has driven mankind's exploration across the centuries, always discovering new horizons to gaze into. Can we describe what we seek to find, in reaching out into the distance in such a way? *Nearness* perhaps, journeying outward in order to *know*, to objectively regard and truly come to understand that which we have at-hand.

Nineteen-forty-seven, and a young Yves Klein aged 19 sits on the beach at Nice looking out at the horizon. The artist and two friends play a game, whereby they divide the world up between themselves, each of them choosing that which they consider to be of most value. One chooses language, another the land, and Klein claims the clear blue sky, signing his name across it with his finger; in doing so, he produces his first, and arguably his greatest, piece of art.

To Klein, there was something in this blue, something dimensionless, something infinite, to experience it was to experience the immaterial, an encounter beyond physical things; a confrontation with the void. After a time, Klein's encounter on the beach led him to refine the pallet of his painted works down to a single ultramarine tone, one which he later trademarked under his own name; 'International Klein blue'. He sought to represent the spirit, the sky, the water, the immaterial and the remote, creating painted works that when viewed, however near, were always explorations of disembodiment and distance. Following the production of a great number of paintings and sculptural works, in 1957, Klein took a globe and blanketed the surface with his signature blue tone, it became a world without boundaries between land and sea, as though the earth itself had become sky, as though looking down was looking up. There was a will, to divorce oneself from the restrictions of the physical environment, to rise above the material, to fly, to leap into the void.

And just such a leap was to become the culmination of Klein's work. In October of 1960, above a quiet Paris street, Yves Klein threw himself from the rooftop of an apartment building. The photographic record of this event (entitled 'Leap into the Void') shows the artist, not falling, but in flight, frozen in time above the stone pavement far below him. In the instant of the photograph, Klein was freed from gravity, his body arced, his hands reaching up into the sky; like tribal ritual of Vanuatu, he sought to conquer himself, his own limitations, his own fear, to disappear into the void and return transformed. Of course, the image is fraudulent; two separate photographs stitched together, the top half, Klein in mid-air, the bottom an empty street. In reality, a group of volunteers assembled on the pavement below Klein, catching him in a tarpaulin as he fell to earth. Though despite this deception, in that fraction of a second caught on film, Klein flies, immortalised for eternity, the timeless realm of the photograph holding him above the ground forever.

A controversy surrounds the events that occurred after Klein's leap had been witnessed. Sometime after the initial jump, without a photographer or crowd of onlookers it has been stated that Klein made a second leap; but this time without a safety-net, nothing between himself and the earth below. Klein never spoke of this event, but those closest to him, including his then-partner Bernadette Allain, profess to this *true* leap, undertaken as a challenge to himself, an act of defiance against the limitations of his own being. No evidence exists of this, save for a few scant testimonials, and it must be regarded with

suspicion from an artist such as Klein, associated as he is with a level of grandiosity and self-mythologising. Though perhaps its validity is inconsequential, or at least secondary to the *idea* of what Klein may have done, this *real* jump can be seen as a test of the imagination for those that heard of it, forcing them to question and expand their own conceptions of possibility.

However, perhaps it is worth noting that following this date, Klein limped heavily on his left leg, until the end of his life.

This end was to be nearer than the artist had imagined, and in 1962 Yves Klein died following a series of heart-attacks; he was 34 years old. Klein had spent his life trying to find a route into the immaterial, into the void, and it is perhaps a cruel irony that his very existence should itself fade into nothingness so early. The compulsion that drove him however, endured, in the spirit of man's reach for the distant horizon, to look up into the sky, to fly.

Nineteen-sixty-eight; six years after the death of Yves Klein. Pilot William Anders of Apollo 8, NASA's first mission to circumnavigate the moon, breaks the Saturn V rocket out of the earth's gravitational pull for the first time. As the craft emerged out of the moon's shadow, the crew became the first human beings to comprehend the earth in its entirety from another world, a brilliant blue orb, rising above the lunar surface. Had Klein lived to witness this, what would he have felt? Seeing technology drive humanity outwards, out into that *void* which he had signed on the beach as a young man. To sail skyward, to turn, and to look back after the ascent. From this vastness of distance, from this great height, would Klein have felt detached, or *nearer* than he could ever have imagined, looking down upon his blue once again; no longer the colour of that infinite horizon, but of home.

Value is a product of the climb; our potentials laid bare in the view from the summit.



Bill Anders (NASA - Apollo 8) | **Earthrise** | 1968 (Fig. 0.1)

## INTRODUCTION

Things aren't where they used to be. Technology's escalating capacity to upturn our understood conceptions of *locality* can be seen to provoke profound implications within our encounters and our capacity to derive meaning and value from them. For the work of art, an object that has been defined by its spatial singularity, "its unique existence in the place where it is at this moment" (Benjamin 1936a, p.5), such circumstances may be seen to incur severe liabilities. With the boundless accessibility of digitised material increasingly ubiquitous, how is our understanding of these artifacts changed, how is the value that we innately bestow upon them affected and what cultural shifts can this be seen to elicit? What is the connection between the perceived significance of an object and the arena in which we encounter it? For the cultural institutions that have traditionally framed such experiences, what are the challenges produced by such circumstances and can these be evidenced by the current workings of arts organisations? In confronting this situation (and its manifestations within how the art object's value is currently conceived of), this study will pose the following central question:

*In what ways (and to what degree) may we regard the contemporary conditions facing the art object (and the values that these elicit) as a consequence of our prevailing technological landscape and its propensity to re-configure our conceptions of space and place?*

In consideration of this, the arguments presented in this work will be framed by the author's proposition that value in our experiences is (in-part) derived from the varying forms of *challenge* that their attainment has posed (consider the metaphor of 'the climb' articulated in the preface to the thesis). The influence of technology (by its very nature) is to diminish (or eradicate) such challenge, or to render the previously unattainable as within our grasp. As will be asserted, digital media (and the ever-present, non-localised ontology of the digital object) fundamentally changes our relationship to the one-of-a-kind artwork, to the very conception of authenticity, in a way that far outstrips the cultural impact of, for instance, the emergence of the photograph. A homogenised facsimile of 'everything' is in our hands, all at once, anywhere, always, forever.

The trajectory of technological progression increasingly overcomes the distances that once separated ‘subject’ from ‘object’, dulling the ‘aura’ of the rare, the exotic and the remote. Are such qualities disposable, their perceived worth mere relics of a pre-digital understanding of the world? Alternatively, is their loss detrimental to our lives, undermining that which once brought fulfilment, new insights and understanding? This thesis will propose the latter of these, illustrating a ‘crisis context’ for the work of art that threatens the on-going viability of its very existence.

In assessment of this, it is first necessary to examine such contemporary conditions, noting how the value of art is ascribed today and by what criteria. Changes in this over historical time will be considered and the degree to which these may be indicative of technology’s leverage as a cultural influence. During the period of this doctoral study, several large-scale research projects, exploring the value of the arts contemporarily, have reached fulfilment, including: *The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society – an Evidence Review* (Arts Council England 2014), *Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth – The 2015 Report by the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value* (Warwick Commission 2015) and *Understanding the value of arts and culture – The AHRC Cultural Value Project* (Arts & Humanities Research Council 2016). These, in addition to other relevant pieces of academic literature, research and polling, will be utilised to assess the predominant justifications made for art and culture today, gauging this *zeitgeist*, and noting the ways in which technological developments can be considered as a steering force in our attributions of worth.

In light of this (and following an introductory preface), within the second chapter I will interrogate the fundamental characteristics of ‘value’ more deeply through a methodology of philosophical enquiry. The defining attributes of this notion will be explored, alongside its varying interpretations, leading to the formulation of a reasoned interpretation that will expound the term’s use within this work. What do we mean by ‘value’ and how can we classify its nature (in the ontological sense), what is the veracity of the claims we make towards it (in terms of epistemology) and what elements engender it within our (phenomenological) lived experience of the world. The opposition between objective and subjective measures of valuation will be analysed in depth (building upon a discussion of art’s often-perceived subjectivity that will begin in the first chapter of this study). With the litany of (often highly discrepant) philosophical perspectives that have sought to tackle this polarising question, what key points of

divergence can be identified and can any consistencies be drawn in the understood nature of value that may (to some degree) unify such diverse interpretations? Ultimately, in consummation of the core debates in this area, which standpoint will we consider to be the most defensible?

Building upon this discussion, core to chapter three will be a detailed investigation into Walter Benjamin's concept of the 'aura', specifying its stated properties, the implications of its loss (as a consequence of mechanical reproduction), and its applicability to our contemporary circumstances. Can the aura be meaningfully rethought today (following Benjamin's line of argument) and how many we define its imperative in light of the technological landscape of our present moment? Critically, to what extent may we regard Benjamin's forecasting of the aura's demise to be perceivable contemporarily and can we relate this persuasively to the cultural conditions facing the arts as outlined in the first chapter? An important discussion will be had here on Benjamin's usage of the term 'distance', the varying interpretations of this and the meanings that we may take from it today; with the global reach of wireless networks, is 'distance' from the object of experience an increasingly rare commodity? Moreover, may we regard such *distances* as the essential qualifiers of the aura through a contemporary reading of Benjamin's work? This new interpretation of Benjamin's philosophy will underpin the fundamental claims of the thesis, asserting the *value of distance*, as a timely cultural imperative.

In reaching a reasoned explanation of Benjamin's aura (and its relationship to distance) as a contemporary device for validating the art object, chapter four will confront technology's propensity for eradicating one's spatio-temporal understandings. With particular reference to the works of Paul Virilio and Friedrich Kittler, this chapter will seek to reveal key characteristics of our present technological landscape, their implications and antecedents, and consequently, the underlying vulnerabilities that threaten the art object's auric integrity. The interconnected relationship between *speed*, *distance* and *time* will first be considered; noting the ways in which fluctuations in our comprehension of one of these phenomena is affecting of how we conceive of the others. In consideration of this, we will look to developments in transportation technologies (including the proliferation of rail travel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) noting this ways in which this was thought to increasingly detach the human being from previously uncontested spatio-temporal knowledge. The implications of a perceived *acceleration* of contemporary life will also be explored, suggesting our

increasing appetite for speed and boundless accessibility, and the *contagious* effect of this as it spreads into multiple domains of experience.

This final chapter will also consider a range of artistic works that reflect, or respond to, such conditions. As a product of my collaborative placement with Liverpool's Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (FACT), I will examine the rationale of numerous creative projects focused upon the implications of emergent technologies and their potential to transform our once uncontested assumptions about space and place. Through analysis of these works, artist interviews and audience feedback, I will reflect upon the ways in which artists can assimilate new technologies, challenging our preconceptions of their functioning and empowering audiences to question their ramifications as agents of cultural change. Latterly within this chapter, I will also reflect upon some of my own projects as a practicing artist that have been informed by the focus of this study. Creating works that are tied intimately to specific sites, and that only exist within a defined window of time, such works pursue the antithesis of technological telepresence and its endemic spatial distortions. The value of such approaches and their relevance to our contemporary situation will be considered, asking: how can we retain a somatic relationship to space and place in a time of escalating non-locality?

In conclusion, and drawing upon the ideas put fourth in the previous chapters, I will state a reasoned position regarding the central question of this study; as the boundaries of the world shift in line with technological change, what influence can this be seen to exert over our values, and consequently, for the work of art and its cultural identity, what is at stake?

CHAPTER

I

# JUSTIFYING CULTURE

## Introduction

As outlined within the main introduction to this study, within this opening chapter, I will assess the criteria by which the arts are publicly justified and how this can be witnessed within the workings and professed ambitions of cultural organisations. This discussion will begin with recourse to several of the recent, large-scale research projects conducted in relation to cultural value, including: *The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society – an Evidence Review* (Arts Council England 2014), *Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth – The 2015 Report by the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value* (Warwick Commission 2015) and *Understanding the value of arts and culture – The AHRC Cultural Value Project* (Arts & Humanities Research Council 2016). The common prerogatives raised by such studies will be scrutinised and their implications questioned in a bid to illustrate broader cultural leanings.

A significant aspect of this chapter will be involved with addressing the *intrinsic* arguments for arts worth versus the *instrumental* claims. Broadly speaking, these terms describing *that which is of its own autonomous value*, versus *that which serves the fulfillment of a tertiary (social, political etc.) imperative*. More simply put; *that which is an end in itself* versus *that which provides a means*.

## **I. Current reporting on the value of arts and culture**

So the arts and arts centres, previously cut loose from their intellectual moorings by current ways of thinking, will ebb away in a tide of indifference compounded with actual hostility. They already stand naked and without defence in a world where what cannot be measured is not valued; where what cannot be predicted will not be risked; where what cannot be controlled will not be permitted; where what cannot deliver a forecast outcome is not undertaken; where what does not belong to all will be allowed to none. That is the Agony.

(Tusa 1999, p.25)

Writing at the close of the twentieth century, the former director of London's Barbican Centre John Tusa narrates a grim forecast for the societal conditions facing the arts in the upcoming millennium. In a fundamental sense, the 'agony' Tusa envisions is one born out of a shifted cultural zeitgeist; a set of circumstances in which previously entrenched values become subject to revision. Reflecting upon this situation and the re-weighting of priority and significance it is seen to initiate, Tusa goes on to lament the loss of a climate in which 'values are valued rather than costed; [...] where art for art's sake is pigeon-holed as a personal obsession rather than recognised as a vital social ingredient; where the public good is dismissed as a chimera so long as it cannot be quantified on a balance sheet' (Tusa 1999, pp.25-26).

Contemplating this today, one may regard Tusa's assessments as hyperbolic, or less favourably perhaps, as the cries of entitlement from an individual with significant cultural privilege. An argument could even be made that what he foresees, far from posing a threat, articulates a drive for egalitarianism, inclusivity and a more prudent, economically-conscious approach to public finances allocated to the arts. This perspective can be outlined persuasively, chiefly due to the fact that it offers directly observable, quantifiable 'balance sheet' data for the validation of art's worth. Yet, we must ask what is at stake when the criteria by which we judge the value of culture is re-thought so radically? To what extent can we regard this refocusing of priority to be evident in the language and measures by

which the arts are justifying themselves, their activities and their entitlements in our contemporary situation? In consummation, will we come to concede Tusa's anxieties as being warranted?

Writing in his foreword to Arts Council England's (ACE) 2014 report, *The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society* (Arts Council England 2014), ACE's chairman Sir Peter Bazalgette initially introduces a qualifying sentiment designed to overarch his ensuing text and the report as a whole:

When we talk about the value of arts and culture, we should always start with the intrinsic – how arts and culture illuminate our inner lives and enrich our emotional world. This is what we cherish.

(Arts Council England 2014, p.4)

Such a statement, with its emphasis upon the intrinsic worth of cultural production, mirrors the '*art for arts sake*' mentality of Tusa, setting this up as the primary evaluative measure for the arts that must proceed all subsequent criteria and necessarily supersede their significance. However, following this preliminary notion, Bazalgette reconciles that despite arts *inherent* worth being of priority, it is 'a philosophical assertion that cannot be measured in numbers' (p.4). Bazalgette goes on to stress that:

[...] while we do not cherish arts and culture because of the impact on our social wellbeing and cohesion, our physical and mental health, our education system, our national status and our economy, they do confer these benefits and we need to show how important this is.

(Arts Council England 2014, p.4)

An acknowledgement is made here, that whilst the value of art is principally intrinsic, we must resort to alternate forms of valuation (the tertiary or 'instrumental' impacts of art and culture) that are quantifiable for the public discussion of art's worth. Consequently, the ACE report goes on to focus exclusively upon four areas that allow for this, under the headings of *Economy, Society, Health & Wellbeing* and *Education*. These are subsequently condensed into the following infographic intended as a summary of the wider report and released alongside.



Whilst of course it is true to say that art and culture can impact positively upon social, educative, health and economic concerns, such secondary impacts cannot be employed to fully underpin the foundational discussions of art's value (as the graphic overleaf tacitly attempts). Firstly, such objectives are those to which arts and culture are ill equipped to accomplish, particularly when contrasted by their fulfilment within other sectors. Speaking at a public 'Provocation' forum at the British Library in February 2015, the BBC's former Economics Editor, Robert Peston, responded to the findings of the newly published Warwick Commission report *Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth* (Warwick Commission 2015). This report (led by Eleonora Belfiore and Jonathan Neelands of Warwick University) was the culmination of a 12-month enquiry tasked to consider 'how Britain can secure greater value from its cultural and creative assets' (p.6) and act as a 'blueprint for Britain's cultural and creative enrichment' (p.12).

Addressing an audience of cultural sector representatives<sup>2</sup>, Peston evoked Gilbert Ryle's concept of the 'category error'<sup>3</sup> (Ryle 2002) in assessment of the Warwick Commissions focus upon the fiscal benefits of arts and culture to the UK economy. Reciting figures from the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR)<sup>4</sup>, Peston noted that the total revenues of arts and culture for the UK in 2011 were £12.4 billion and that the sector employed one hundred and eleven thousand people. By contrast, during the same year, Tesco generated revenues of £42.4 billion, whilst employing three hundred thousand. Having suggested underlying measures of value (further to the economic argument) that prevent us from seeking to turn 'the National theatre into a Tesco', Peston went on to argue that:

Its not to say that one cant make arguments for the good that the arts do in an economic sense, but that should not be the fundamental justification.

(Peston 2015)

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<sup>1</sup> This infographic was retrieved from Arts Council England's website and can be accessed here:

<sup>2</sup> Documentary video from this event can be accessed from Warwick University's website here: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/research/warwickcommission/futureculture/events/provocation1/videos/>

<sup>3</sup> A semantic or ontological error in which things belonging to a particular category are presented as if they belong to a different category.

<sup>4</sup> This report from the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) entitled *The contribution of the arts and culture to the national economy* can be accessed here: [http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/The\\_contribution\\_of\\_the\\_arts\\_and\\_culture\\_to\\_the\\_national\\_economy.pdf](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/The_contribution_of_the_arts_and_culture_to_the_national_economy.pdf)

Consider a hypothetical scenario in which it were conclusively proved that the cultural sector elicited zero (or even negative) impacts upon the wider economy. Does it seem realistic to presume that in such a situation, public spending on the arts would be abolished and participation actively discouraged? Naturally, such an eventuality has the air of overt implausibility. Yet, if we are to represent the core value of arts and culture as founded upon their monetary impacts (as is conveyed by the Warwick Commission's report and others), then this is the inevitable (if counter-intuitive and unforeseeable) consequence of what we are being led to understand.

Equally, if we are to critically examine the other claims made for measurable benefits from the arts across society (in areas such as education and health) then the assertions made can often appear tenuous if not self-consciously misleading. Returning to ACE's infographic, that declares:

ALMOST 60% of people are **more likely to report good health** if they've attended a **cultural place or event** in the last 12 months

Clearly, this statement and its use of statistics is structured (with the use of capitalisations and bolding) to imply a direct, causal benefit to health and wellbeing from participation within cultural activity<sup>5</sup>. Though is it not more reasonable to assume that individuals actively engaged with the arts (tending to be younger and of higher socio-economic status<sup>6</sup>) are demographically less likely to suffer health concerns when compared with the national average? The desired inference of some enigmatic relationship between cultural attendance and physical wellness collapses under scrutiny (a deficit of validity surely recognised by its authors) yet its subtle insinuation is evidently regarded as sufficient to placate the casual reader.

Similarly, claims suggestive of educational advantages from arts participation, such as that children 'from low income families who take part in arts activities at school are **three times more likely to get a degree**', fail to consider (or at least reference) broader, situational factors. Schools with the means and willingness to offer extensive arts programmes are characteristically those that deliver higher attainment with a correspondingly greater percentage of university acceptances from amongst their

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<sup>5</sup>(Brown & Carnwath 2014) address the current lack of research linking arts participation to health benefits, stating that, 'we lack longitudinal studies of the health benefits of participation in the arts, and comparative studies of the effects of participation in the arts as opposed to say, participation in sport. We cannot demonstrate why the arts are unique in what they do' (p.3).

<sup>6</sup>For demographic figures of participation within the arts see: *Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth – The 2015 Report by the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value*. pp.31-41.

students. Moreover, is it not predictable that, generally speaking, the parents and guardians who offer support and encouragement for extra-curricular arts activities would also be those advocating higher education?

However, it is perhaps in the attested betterments offered by culture to society at-large where this report is most lacking. Phatic assertions, unexplored, evidenced or expanded upon, suggesting that participation with that arts can, ‘make communities feel **safer and stronger**’ or ‘contribute to **community cohesion**’ add little to the conversation and stand as the antithesis to Tusa’s conception of culture as the ‘vital social ingredient’. The place of art within society, its very *cultural identity*, is central to this study and it will be explored further within this chapter.

Data and evidence about instrumental impacts have been produced in a context where organisations need to obtain funding. Whatever the merits or otherwise of individual pieces of research, from a systemic point of view, the objectivity of the information commissioned and produced must be questioned.

(Holden 2004, p.20)

Overall, this form of disingenuous rhetoric, pressing arts and culture into the service of myriad social concerns is rife, and can be evidenced throughout much of the recent reporting examined here. Whether misguided idealism or intentional artifice, it may be argued that the will to justify culture by such criteria illustrates a failure to speak honestly of its capacities and to engage sufficiently with its essential substance. Could it ever be suggested with any moral seriousness, that to bolster health and wellbeing, finite public resources should be spent on art galleries, rather than subsidised sports facilities, drug and alcohol dependency services, hospitals or medical research? As David Stevenson writes in his policy review of the Warwick Commission’s report, ‘you would not expect a hawk to pollenate daisies’ (Stevenson 2015).

In confronting this, an uncomfortable realisation can be seen to emerge. That if we are to take seriously the notion that the value of arts and culture is measured by its quantifiable socio-economic impacts, then they yield a net loss relative to a situation in which the resources been directed elsewhere.

Despite this, the reasoning behind such approaches can be vividly discerned, and is occasionally expressed outright; that these are the measures by which the arts can publically qualify for financial investment, particularly within a period of economic austerity. As Bazalgette himself states, quantifying benefits in facts and figures ‘is something that arts and culture organisations will always have to do in order to secure funding from both public and private sources’ (Arts Council England 2014, p.4). Why though, should this be the case, whereby the instrumental qualities of the arts hold a greater perceived legitimacy than the intrinsic?

Perhaps, a key difficulty that has led to these circumstances lies in our inability to accurately define terms in ways that are universally accepted; what exactly does one mean by *cultural value*? Within the field of cultural economics, this term is given to mean the value produced by cultural goods and experiences that is ‘non-economic’ and that cannot be expressed by the mainstream approaches to economic measurement (Throsby 2001). Indeed, Klammer (2004) argues that the cultural value of an experience may be diminished if it is regarded in economic terms. Meanwhile, researchers such as John Holden (2004, 2006), Head of Culture at UK think-tank Demos<sup>7</sup>, argues that cultural value should be thought of as a set of strategies rather than as a fixed outcome, strategies that cultural institutions should utilise in order to yield maximum impact from their work (in intrinsic, instrumental and institutional terms<sup>8</sup>).

It is clear then, that the notion of cultural value contains a sufficient degree of flexibility as to be serviceable to a variety of interpretations that in turn benefit a variety of intentions. As such, can we consider the term to be too inconclusive to serve any substantive usage? Reflecting upon this, perhaps it may be suggested that in much of the rhetoric surrounding art’s value, this *ambiguity itself* is being utilised; commentators offering mere allusions to merits, intended to bolster both instrumental outputs that lack empirical substance and intrinsic values deemed too esoteric for public consumption.

Dissatisfied with the debate over intrinsic versus instrumental justifications for the arts, John Knell and Matthew Taylor propose a seemingly radical alternative for considering this dichotomy, attempting to redefine (and concretise) the understanding of cultural value in the public sphere. Writing in *Art*

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<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.demos.co.uk>

<sup>8</sup> This perspective aligns Holden’s work more closely with the approach taken by The Warwick Commission report and the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s (AHRC) *Cultural Value Project* (2016). See: <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/documents/publications/cultural-value-project-final-report/>

*Funding, Austerity and the Big Society – Remaking the case for the arts?* (2011), the authors argue that all art serves the purpose of providing value and benefits to those who experience it, so that all arguments in favour of the arts are in fact instrumental arguments. They even go so far as to state that, ‘the traditional intrinsic argument for the arts – the so-called arts for arts sake plea – is a form of instrumentalism’ (Knell & Taylor 2011, p.25). Consequently, a call is made to measure ‘artistic (intrinsic) value more effectively’ (p.19) enabling this to form part of the authors proposed ‘new instrumentalism’, however, at no point do they specify the ways in which this may be achieved. In a period of economic uncertainty, Knell and Taylor regard this as a pivotal responsibility for the arts, stating that:

We think this re-articulation is essential and timely. All publicly funded art has a responsibility to give a clear account of its value to the society that funds it. [...] The argument is not simply whether arts are virtuous but whether they are more virtuous than other claims on the public purse.

When voices in the cultural sector rail against demands for evidence of impact they are implicitly asserting that their sector alone should be exempted from the demands of accountability placed on other recipients of taxpayers’ money.

(Knell & Taylor 2011, p.8)

Despite articulating a compelling case for art’s necessity to justify itself financially, the subsequent methodology outlined by Knell and Taylor is highly disputable. In simply relabeling artistic qualities (previously understood as intrinsic) as instrumental to society, yet failing to account for how these might be quantified (and thus ‘instrumentalised’), the authors, arguably, fail to deliver upon their own objectives. For it may be the case that these are non-overlapping magisteria, contrasting methods of discursive argument, the conflation of which, merely serves to muddy the water of how the value of art is understood. As such, it is perhaps pertinent to reconsider the sentiment expressed (though dismissed) by Knell and Taylor in the statement above; that in some sense the arts may ‘be exempted from the demands of accountability’ required by other sectors.

In overall consideration of the recent reporting examined here, two distinct approaches can be envisioned for the public justification of the arts going forward. Either the arts continue to increasingly validate themselves by appealing to a perceived public pressure to legitimise their financial cost with (often highly suspect) claims towards wider societal impacts, or a radically alternative project is undertaken, one focused upon shifting the tenor of this conversation in the public sphere; where aesthetic 'good' is embraced as its own qualification. Of course, both of these propositions pose challenges, though it may be argued that only the latter offers a sustainable vision for a truly thriving cultural landscape.

In the face of economic instability, an arts sector substantiating itself on the basis of instrumental outcomes in a hucksterish fashion will, in-time, inevitably incur the ire of the public at-large. Identifiers of the 'tide of indifference compounded with actual hostility' prophesied by John Tusa in the opening of this chapter are not difficult to discern, One need only turn the pages of a tabloid newspaper<sup>9</sup>. Such public cynicism can only be challenged by inciting more widespread understanding of the arts and it is reasonably the duty of cultural leaders to embrace this role without recourse to culture's tertiary benefits (that may erode this perceived worth as Klammer (2004) suggests). As Holden writes:

The cultural aims and practices of organisations have been subverted. Energies have been directed into chasing funding and collecting evidence rather than achieving cultural purposes. In the search for outcomes and ancillary benefits, the essence of culture has been lost.

(Holden 2004, p.20)

In order to reclaim this, Holden advocates that cultural professionals must reaffirm their responsibilities as arbiters of aesthetic worth, enabling them to influence public perception, and revealing value where previously there had only been potential (p.36). It is perhaps through the acceptance of this task that the 'essence of culture' can be reforged, propelling the intrinsic argument for art's worth back into the centre of public life and nullifying the case for its current instrumental preoccupations.

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<sup>9</sup> See: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1365672/Modern-art-How-gallery-visitors-viewed-work-Damien-Hirst-Tracy-Emin-5-seconds.html> & <https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/959303/what-a-load-of-crop-men-dressed-as-vegetables-shortlisted-for-turner-prize/>

There exists however a considerable obstacle preventing this, that it runs so sharply against a prevailing gestalt vitiating much of the language surrounding art and the degrees of significance that we assign to it. A perception that, in its intrinsic value and inherent meaning, all art is uniquely subjective. This claim, that will be examined shortly, prevents the formation of hierarchies of judgement from being permissible, either those that originate from individuals, or perhaps more conspicuously, from institutions. If the value of all artworks are implicitly subjective (based on mere opinion or conjecture), then the weight afforded to the judgments of cultural leaders evaporates; nothing can be of intrinsic worth if its beauty is founded solely upon the eye of its beholder. Peaks and troughs of artistic endeavour cease to be discerned, one may be tempted to say that they *flat-line*. Everything becomes publically classified as equal in worth, and in such a scenario, worthless. For there can be no values without disparity, without inequality, we can never be *for* something without confronting its antithesis, that which we stand *against*.

Politics and policy flow downstream from culture (in the societal sense). Prevailing social conditions inform the choices and direction of successive governments<sup>10</sup> in their approach to the arts and perhaps it may be suggested that a failure (within numerous sectors) to celebrate and uphold outstanding works of creative endeavour over others (such as those conceived primarily as entertainment) has led to a situation in which the eminence of so-called ‘high art’ is increasingly greeted with suspicion in the public mind. Institutions fearing to appear cliquish, or to propound exclusivity, will naturally veer from this (and from Holden’s advocated position as arbiters of aesthetic worth), instead, they will strive for inclusivity, and a necessary populism, forcing the need to justify their financial allocations through tertiary social impacts as their rarefied positions of cultural authority decline.

Aesthetic worth cannot be quantified, nor can it be *proven*. The varying abstractions that litter the reporting examined here demonstrate this above all else, though I will proceed (in the following section) to argue that its reality is difficult to deny.

Despite the criticisms of the criteria used to justify financial investment above, I do not consider this to be undertaken in ill faith, or make accusations of blanket racketeering. Instead I consider this evidence that art’s intrinsic ‘good’ is perceived as either incommunicable by claimants, or insufficient for public

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<sup>10</sup> For an outline of the approach taken by successive governments to spending on the arts see (Holden 2004, p.22) and (Tusa 1999, pp.75-101).

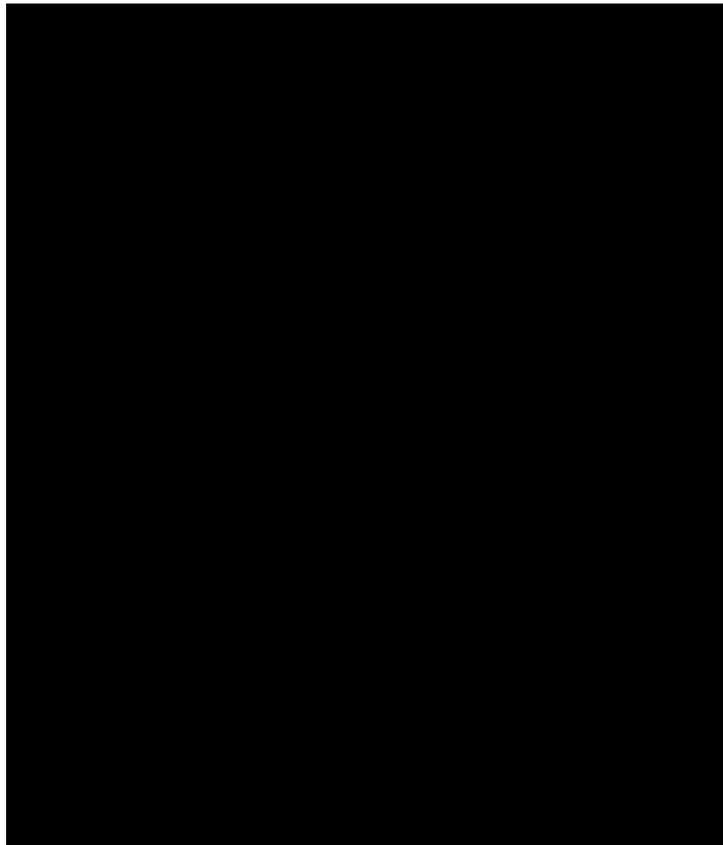
approval. Unintentionally perhaps, from the latter of these, one can infer something approaching condescension, that for public consumption, the value of art needs to be laid-out in statistics, the simplest form of valuation possible, requiring no knowledge of a subject on behalf of the reader. Yet, the arts can be dense, academic, inaccessible and challenging, their worth only revealed gradually in the intellectual conquering of these. It is the function of cultural organisations to point the way and lead this undertaking rather than the obfuscation of seeking instrumental affirmations for their work. Employing the art's as a utility in this way attempts to endow a function that confuses intentions and renders Gautier's 'l'art pour l'art' impossibility. People will simply not value that which they cannot understand or comprehend as being of intrinsic worth. For the artwork, a category of object without utility, serving no function other than its own existence, such a situation is terminal.

In summation, it may be argued that many of the root causes underlying many of John Tusa's concerns (outlined at the beginning of this chapter) can be identified in the current language and criteria used for the justification of arts and culture. Further to this however, it is important to consider why such circumstances have arisen; if the arts were publically venerated and understood as aspirational, defining cultural achievements, would justifications of this kind be necessary? If such a situation is to be sought, it would necessitate that we rethink the pernicious claims toward relativism and art's fundamentally subjective ontology, stating, without apology, that 'good art' is a meaningful sentiment. To assert the contrary, that all art, and all opinions of it, are of equivalent importance is to be complicit in the eradication of meaning and cultural significance in a bid for egalitarianism; a polite fiction born out of a misplaced piety.

## **II. The virtues of elitism**

In the winter of 2006 (at the age of nineteen) I made my first visit to Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie (New National Gallery) and its permanent collection housed beneath the floating Mies van der Rohe pavilion. Whilst perusing the various works, I encountered a monochrome canvas by the artist Yves Klein, simply framed and presented among an assortment of works representative of *nouveau réalisme*. Klein was an artist of whom I was aware, but had little knowledge of, in terms of the context and intentions underlying his work. I knew that he was largely defined by a signature blue tone, that he had trademarked this under his own name and that he was regarded as being of considerable importance to

the narrative history of western art in the twentieth century. Despite this, I perceived little in the work that I could engage with, on an aesthetic or conceptual level; no profundity was to be found in the qualities of the ultramarine hue itself and its promotion by the artist struck me as affected and baseless. After glancing over the work for perhaps two or three seconds, feeling indifference and conceivably a low-level resentment, I moved on.



Yves Klein | **IKB79** – Paint on canvas on plywood | 1959 (Fig. 1.2)

Five years later, I would seek out Klein's work again, by which time, academically, as a practitioner and on an acutely personal level, the artist and his practice had attained a weight of revealed significance. In short, the value that I assigned to the artist's work had been fundamentally altered. In consideration of the ways in which the values of art and culture are perceived, justified and encouraged on a broader scale, the process by which this personal evolution occurred is perhaps interesting to explore.

Where previously I had confronted an arid blankness, the very concept of nothingness (the ‘void’ central to Klein’s practice) had now become intellectually enriched beyond measure. Within it I witnessed Klein’s encounter on the beach in Nice (the artist himself aged 19 at the time), the frustrations he felt with his early multi-coloured monochrome series’ (Klein 2003, p.818), his membership as a knight of the Rosicrucian Order<sup>11</sup>, his time in Japan mastering Judo and its philosophical tenets (Klein 2009), his fascination with the writings of Gaston Bachelard (Bachelard 1988), his absolutism, his near fanaticism, his grandiosity, his self-mythologising and other frenetic personal traits. I saw the timeline of Klein’s life stretching back through the object; a vessel of these accumulated histories. It was this understanding that engendered such newfound affinity.

Considering this transformed conception, one may regard it as evidence of art’s innately subjective worth; that the attribution of significance by individual(s) (with their naturally changeable perspectives) is the font of all values. However, if such a viewpoint is to be upheld, it requires that all subjective estimations are considered equally valid. If art is of no intrinsic worth, this value only supplied by the spectator, if there is no right or wrong, good or bad, then all perspectives are commensurate in their legitimacy.

With the example of my experiences with Klein’s work outlined above, I do not consider this to be the case. Instead I would argue that the accumulation of knowledge enabled me to climb towards greater *objectivity* in my comprehension of the artist; a growing awareness that cleared the fog of perceived banality allowing glimpses of the numinous once concealed. In essence, I consider my impression of Klein’s work at 19 to have been wrong, invalid, and inferior in its legitimacy to my subsequent appreciation. The internal acknowledgement of this reinforces an integral (though much maligned) position, one seemingly self-evident yet so often (though perhaps for appearance’s sake) disregarded within the arts; that the informed opinion is of a greater authority to that which is founded upon blind supposition. Such is the intended definition of *elitism* in its usage here.

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<sup>11</sup> “Rosicrucian teachings are a combination of occultism and other religious beliefs and practices, including Hermeticism, Jewish mysticism, and Christian Gnosticism. The central feature of Rosicrucianism is the belief that its members possess secret wisdom that was handed down to them from ancient times.” Encyclopedia definition can be accessed here: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rosicrucians>

Elitism is the belief or attitude that some individuals who form an elite—a select group of people with a certain ancestry, intrinsic quality or worth, high intellect, wealth, specialized training or experience, or other distinctive attributes—are those whose influence or authority is greater than that of others; whose views on a matter are to be taken more seriously or carry more weight; whose views or actions are more likely to be constructive to society as a whole; or whose extraordinary skills, abilities, or wisdom render them especially fit to govern<sup>12</sup>.

Within this section, three specific aspects of cultural consumption will be examined; the ways in which these enable value to be derived from our encounters with the art object, and the case for acknowledging *hierarchies* for the greater fulfillment of such derivation. These overlapping elements are; our personal (or subjective) conceptions of an object, the weight of cultural significance afforded to it (in a wider, societal sense), and the experiential properties of the varying contexts in which the object is confronted. These can be regarded as the key domains within which attributions of worth are applied to arts and culture and the influence of elitism (or lack thereof) will be considered across each of them.

To begin by assessing the subjective appreciations of art (those of an individual's personal estimation), it is important to first reiterate that, from the perspective of this study, these may not necessarily reflect the true value of an artwork. Rather, they mirror an individual's level of engagement, affinity and understanding of an object that may become amplified over time (through learning and experience) towards greater degrees of perceived significance. If such a process is seen to be at work within our subjective comprehensions of art and culture, this must necessitate that these objects hold within themselves some static, intrinsic worth that can be gradually unearthed through our intellectual labors.

However, whilst this is suggestive that forms of cultural education are pivotal for an individual's propensity and capacity to find value in the arts, it can appear as though many cultural organisations underestimate the importance of such activity.

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<sup>12</sup> Definition taken from Wikipedia entry that can be accessed here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elitism>

*Beyond Constructivism: rethinking gallery education*, is a 2013/2014 collaborative research project undertaken by the University of Liverpool's Centre for Architecture and the Visual Arts (CAVA) in partnership with Tate Liverpool. This project, led by Antoinette McKane, sought to initiate conversations with a variety of stakeholders in gallery education and distill a series of pragmatic recommendations for future working based upon the core issues that emerged. Within the executive summary document of this research (McKane 2014), an imperative for the greater integration of educational activities into the wider programmes of museums and galleries is outlined; a suggestion made that these are not currently viewed by institutions as being critical to their overall agenda.

Despite efforts in recent decades to raise the professional profile of the gallery educator and to embed education as a mission across art museums and galleries, the role and expertise of the gallery educator continues to be valued less highly than others within these organisations.

(McKane 2014, p.2)

To remedy this situation, McKane suggests that gallery educators and curators must “work together in an integrated way to ensure educational considerations underpin exhibitions and displays from their very conception”, and “allocate a correspondingly significant proportion of their core resources to publicising and delivering educational programmes and activities” (McKane 2014, pp.2-3). These recommendations, born out of conversations with individuals directly involved in museum and gallery education, depict failings in the current attempts to successfully embed *learning* into the primary workings of cultural institutions. As has been suggested, it is arguably through such processes of education that individuals are empowered to derive meaning and significance (value) from their cultural encounters, and the contemporary inadequacies (in some organisations) for recognising this is perhaps worthy of criticism. Moreover, it may be suggested that such insufficiencies play their part in diminishing the public appreciation of the arts on a broader, culture-wide scale.

Whilst this report's emphatic promotion of education is surely laudable, self-defeating inconsistencies can be recognised within it that fatally undermine that core principle. When turning to the role that *learners* enact within their own education, the requisite obligation to cultivate an informed literacy with the arts is arguably subverted, McKane suggesting that:

Learners play an important role in shaping their own gallery education experience, but do not value their own personal responses and interpretations as highly as the art-historical information presented by in-gallery texts, labels and other resources [...] Learners can come to value their own personal responses and interpretations, but only if these are continuously validated within the gallery space over a period of time.

(McKane 2014, p.3)

The implication here is that a ‘learner’s’ benighted understandings of an art object should not be open to challenge, and should instead be regarded as equal in authority to an institution’s own interpretations; perspectives that are customarily backed up by contextual art history, academic research or the word of the artist themselves. Further to this, a culture must be created where the ‘learner’s’ unlettered opinions are ‘continuously validated’, becoming an assumed entitlement that would actively discourage further investigation, the acquisition of new knowledge, and the changes of mind that these elicit. In order to bring about this scenario, McKane proposes interpretative material, “designed to acknowledge that there are many equally-valid meanings to be made from a work of art, depending on individual perspective and experience” (McKane 2014, p.3), in short, educative texts that are castrated of any potential to advocate learning.

On Monday the 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2013, I attended a day of roundtable discussion forums held within the conference facilities of Tate Liverpool and organised by McKane to examine the themes of the above research. During this event, entitled *Rethinking gallery Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, I sat at a table alongside representatives from the education departments of a number of Liverpool’s cultural organisations, including the Bluecoat and National Museums Liverpool (NML)<sup>13</sup>. As conversations developed, a consensus emerged, that as educators within cultural institutions, the priority must be to establish and propagate the notion that all understandings of creative works are of equal value<sup>14</sup>. Far from a purely academic proposition articulated by McKane’s research, it would appear that such ideas are deeply embedded into the rhetoric of institutions themselves.

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<sup>13</sup> NML is a consortium of museums and galleries based within the city of Liverpool and comprising of; Walker Art Gallery, World Museum, Museum of Liverpool, Merseyside Maritime Museum, International Slavery Museum, Sudley House and Lady Lever Art Gallery. See: <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/index.aspx>

<sup>14</sup> Despite feeling an innate, impulsive aversion to this proposition at the time, I did not challenge this during the conversations at Tate Liverpool. Having had time to reflect upon and rationalise my position, this will instead be articulated here.

Of course, such institutions do not operate as if this were true, or as though they fully subscribe to the extent of their professed objectives. Rather, whilst proclaiming the equal weighting of audience opinion to their own internal judgments, these organisations select, curate and interpret their outputs, often alongside accompanying catalogues and contextual publications filled with (often suitably specialist) explanations of works that also adorn the galleries themselves. The writing (quite literally) is on the wall; that all interpretations are equal, but some are more equal than others<sup>15</sup>.

What is under scrutiny here, is not the ways in which institutions conduct their internal activities, or the machinery of producing exhibitions, indeed it is vital that museums and galleries utilise their positions of expertise (the arbiters of aesthetic worth, as Holden puts it) to operate effectively. Instead, it is the language with which they present themselves, and the public face offered up to audiences that is arguably of questionable sincerity. If institutions are to take seriously the self-confessed notion that all interpretations are of equal authority, then they would surely be welcome to allowing any member of the public (regardless of competence) to curate their programmes and compose their various explorative texts. Equally, they must confess to willfully siting themselves in a position in which their role as educators has been abandoned to embolden the pretense of impartiality. Ultimately, they must assert that art is devoid of intellectual content; if the object can mean anything then it is without any defined meaning, it is meaningless. Naturally, no institution would ever admit to any of this and their nonpartisan veneers mask judicious and elitist internal workings, though it is this *mask* that much of the public will see. We are told that the work of art has any meaning we can infer from it, but the authority of the tools and knowledge essential for this task is disregarded in a bid for the appearance of inclusivity. In doing so, institutions jeopardise the public's cultural literacy and consequently, the demand for their continued existence.

It may be argued that the arts should hold a level of mystique in the popular mind; that they must be seen as something worthy of exploration and as containing inner merits, the awareness of which can be intensely valuable to the individual. Such reverence however cannot be applicable to all forms of cultural production and the degrees of significance allocated to different forms of 'art' must not be viewed as equally weighted from the perspective of audiences. This is understandably a contentious debate, asserting that some types of art are better than others, and even the word 'better' in this context

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<sup>15</sup> This is of course a reference to Orwell's *Animal Farm* and its satire of the often thinly veiled hypocrisies in political propaganda.

requires thorough examination. Yet, the cultural significance afforded to the artwork hinges upon this perilously and the case for ‘high-art’s’ elevated position must be made satisfactorily in public discourse if the institutions promoting it are to be sustainably validated.

The imperative for making this case can be seen as a relatively recent phenomenon, indeed, when discussing ‘culture’ fifty years ago, Tusa argues that one did not need to qualify the word by explaining that it did not mean “pop’ culture, or ‘mass’ culture or ‘lifestyle’ culture or ‘club’ culture’ (Tusa 1999, p.15). This can be evidenced in the language of the time, typified by the BBC’s former Director General William Hayley who, in September of 1946, launched the corporation’s *Third Programme*, the world’s first radio network dedicated to ‘matters of art, culture and the intellect’. As Tusa comments:

he saw every civilised nation as a cultural pyramid with a ‘lamentable broad base and a lamentable narrow tip’. Yet the pyramid was not a static one, but culturally upwardly mobile. ‘My conception was of a BBC through the years – many years – which would slowly move listeners from one stratum to the next’.

(Tusa 1999, p.15)

The pyramidal nature of cultural exports identified by Hayley clearly demonstrates an elitist’s conception of the arts and their audience, one that recognises disparities of worth whilst actively encouraging audiences to gravitate upwards toward a perceived higher stratum of artistic endeavours. Hayley freely admitted that this would lead to the exclusion of some audiences, envisaging (and publicly articulating) a target listener group defined as ‘persons of taste, of intelligence, and of education’. However, Hayley presents no animosity or condescension toward those who fall outside of these criteria, merely a steadfast unwillingness to debase a set of personal standards in the pursuit of more widespread public approval. Indeed, Hayley’s notion of the ‘upwardly mobile’ cultural pyramid, far from concretising exclusivity, is conceptualised to actively encourage inclusivity within its upper reaches without recourse to ‘dumbing-down’ (as it would be categorised today). Tusa (whom may rightfully claim descendancy and influence from such ideas) writes of Hayley as someone “supremely self-confident in their values”, who *dutifully* regarded the accumulated Western creative artistic traditions as their rightful inheritance and who made no apologies for this. Erring on the side of

generosity, perhaps this can be succinctly encapsulated by stating that Hayley sought to bring the populace *up* to the level of ‘high-art’ rather than dragging the arts *down* to theirs.

Figures such as Hayley are far less prevalent today; perhaps those of a similar outlook are less emboldened to speak honestly of their viewpoint and beliefs in the privileged position of ‘high art’, that would enable this, can be witnessed as unfashionable. In fact, the (at first glance uncontroversial) assertion that *some art is better than others*, is often hotly contested. Literary critic John Carey, known for his anti-elitist views on high culture, uses the example of the changing perceptions of Shakespeare to argue that the value of all art (even that which is regarded today as beyond reproach) is a subjective cultural construction that transforms over time. Recounting the disparaging opinions of Shakespeare expressed by (among others) Voltaire and Tolstoy, Carey goes on to assert that many within the playwrights’ own time (and even a century after his death), did not consider his plays as ‘high art’ at all, but as a form of populist entertainment.

The fact that they were once popular art, despised by intellectuals, but are now high art, itself suggests that the differences between high and popular art are not intrinsic but culturally constructed.

(Carey 2005, p.63)

As such, Carey argues that the notion of consensus, that something can be proved to be of value if it is widely thought of in such terms amongst many people across time, is a terminally flawed one. Equally, with regards to the impact that ‘high art’ is said to enact upon the individual, Carey sees similarly impassioned aesthetic experiences as derivable from fashion, football or gardening (2005, p.64), activities that would clearly never be placed within the cannon of ‘high art’. Stevenson expresses a similar sentiment in his 2015 critique of the Warwick Commission report in reference to cultural participation, arguing that in wishing to court a diverse audience, the arts sector must resign themselves to supporting (with a level of parity) art forms that they may internally regard as mere entertainment; ‘why should a symphony orchestra be required to do something for which a pantomime appears infinitely more capable?’ (Stevenson 2015, p.207). Carey and others, such as Ellen Dissanayake (1988), view claims to ‘high art’s’ superiority as wholly unsubstantiated (and unsubstantiable), that

'good' in aesthetic terms can never be objective truth and that the claimants proposing this often do so out of a self-styled code of impulsive pomposity; like sheep, thoughtlessly flocking around the favored idols of the day.

One of the more persuasive arguments put forth by Carey concerns the apparent aesthetic disparities between culturally prominent works; if aesthetic 'good' was a definable, quantifiable, objective phenomenon, then why do such creations not conspicuously share more common characteristics and how can these differences be accounted for?

Are the paintings of El Greco or Rubens or Turner objective? Or the poetry of Milton or Pope or Blake? Or the fiction of Swift or Dickens or Kafka? If artists' visions were objective wouldn't their productions be more like each other? Wouldn't they, indeed, be precisely the same, like chemical formulae, which really do represent an objective take on the world?

(Carey 2005, p.41)

On the surface, this interrogation can appear to hold some substantive weight. If 'high art' is to be recognised as being of a greater significance to other forms of creative endeavour, then it must display some defining and consistent characteristic that can be clearly identified. As Carey puts it, would this not naturally lead to a kind of observable 'chemical formulae', a paint-by-numbers approach to the creation of 'great art' that would render the upper echelons of artistic production largely homogenous and of a uniform aesthetic? There are those who have displayed an active willingness to embrace this idea, hard-line high modernists such as Clement Greenberg having advocated an absolutist formalism that rendered down each artistic medium to its fundamental materiality and promoted only the works that conformed to this rationale (Greenberg 2001). Similarly, and also from the first half of the twentieth century, Clive Bell's concepts of *significant form* and *aesthetic emotion* (Bell 2001) argue for prescribed aesthetic qualities that should be sought in order to provoke peak emotional confrontations with the art object.

This emotion is called the aesthetic emotion; and if we can discover some quality common and peculiar to all the objects that provoke it, we shall have solved what I take to be the central problem of aesthetics. We shall have discovered the essential quality in a work of art, the quality that distinguishes works of art from all other classes of object

(Bell 2001, p.113)

As such, we can see modernist writers such as Greenberg and Bell wrestling with the same predicament identified by Carey, the 'central problem of aesthetics' as Bell defines it, which prevents us from easily identifying the constituent qualities that amount to visual primacy. Whilst Carey regards this as a fruitless and flawed endeavour, Greenberg and Bell (to varying extents) seek to offer prescriptive criteria to which 'good' art must adhere. It may be argued however, that both of these positions are deeply problematic. Greenberg's austere formalism can be seen as deeply restrictive and reductive, making no allowances for great works that fall outside of his narrow standards. Moreover, Bell's *aesthetic emotion*, a sensibility only some individuals are naturally gifted with (p.113), amounts to a near eugenic level of immovable exclusivity in artistic appreciation. Defining specific aesthetic properties as the hallmarks of artistic achievement can be justifiably viewed as an unattainable goal, and whilst the cultural conditions of the mid twentieth century accommodated countless attempts at this, none stand up to scrutiny in hindsight. In this way, Carey is right to challenge to notion that 'high art's' superiority is founded upon aesthetic grounds; if we are to consider both Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* and Matisse's vivid figurative works to be examples of significance in painting, then this must be conceded.

Despite this, the fundamental thesis adopted by Carey, that the value of all art is relative and subjective, must be disputed. Can it really be stated, with unfeigned conviction, that the prose of *King Lear* are of no greater objective worth than the hackneyed script of some afternoon soap opera? Does this not strike the reader as incongruous or even agitate the feeling that some moral offence has been committed in its assertion? Do we seek to define our cultural achievements with recourse to tawdry romantic fiction, reality television and disposable pop music, or would this elicit in many a sense of lingering guilt or the

feeling that one has admitted to a deep infantilism? In a 2014 YouGov poll<sup>16</sup> of 1642 UK adults the question was posed, without prompting, ‘In your opinion, what is the greatest work of art ever made?’. Of the top 15 responses, all were the works of artists that would be regarded as ‘high art’ archetypes, with multiple mentions of Van Gogh, Rodin and Da Vinci, and with Michelangelo gaining three separate nominations. Naturally, this may represent nothing more than respondents conforming to choices that they deemed socially acceptable in the context of the interview, reciting the names of artists that are universally recognised as creators of great works. However, that fact that these were seen as the respectable choices is nonetheless interesting to consider. It demonstrates a publically understood hierarchy of cultural production, one perhaps vague and ill defined, yet deeply rooted in the popular consciousness.

The atavisms and impulses that make Carey’s assertions appear contrary to rational judgement attest to this, and I will here set out a justification for the superiority of ‘high art’ and a case for its intrinsic value; one that is not founded upon aesthetic criteria.

Consider the thousands upon thousands of books, essays and articles written in critical analysis of Shakespeare’s plays. Every subtlety of language, every performative strategy, every philosophical meditation is interrogated, argued, interpreted and re-interpreted from every conceivable perspective. Consider the great scholars of Beethoven, Ludwig Schiedermair, Artur Schnabel and others, the depth of arcane scrutiny and the impassioned engagement with harmonic detail. Now, point to the intellectual counterparts of such scholarship in the pop music of the last century; they are not to be found. Reflecting upon this, what may be suggested? Perhaps, that the work of art does not achieve greatness in isolation, but that some works are raised to this vaulted status through the intellectual labours of many individuals across cultures and throughout time. The object’s identity becomes the summation of these accumulated understandings; they are neither the letters on the page nor the paint on the canvas, yet they are a concrete and immovable quantity, as intrinsic as any of the object’s formal properties. This is the quality shared by all ‘high art’, both the measure and means by which it is elevated above other forms of cultural production and an objective qualifier of its worth; this attribute I will define as *Accumulative Value*.

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<sup>16</sup> Full results of this poll can be accessed here:  
[http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus\\_uploads/document/fr12ybtxgl/Internal\\_Results\\_141222\\_ArtWork\\_Website.pdf](http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/fr12ybtxgl/Internal_Results_141222_ArtWork_Website.pdf)

This concept does not of course account for the aesthetic rationale of why some works become subject to prolonged intellectual discussion whilst others do not. As has been discussed, this is a fraught exercise and its undertaking is perhaps perennially doomed to inconclusive outcomes. However, to confront this in some way, we must turn back to the concept of elites. Those individuals with exceptional knowledge, experience and judgment identify works within which they envisage a potentiality; some embryonic promise of a revealed significance. This quality is impossible to quantify, and is admittedly subjective, yet it is the subjective opinion of those with proven expertise. Over time, an intellectual architecture is structured upon this, one that encompasses the object's history and its cumulative understandings, revealing value where previously there had been only potential. The art object itself (which of course also includes music, literature etc.) thus serves as the foundation to a much larger cultural apparatus; a totem that embodies a specific totality of knowledge. Through learning, we are enabled to comprehend this knowledge as part of the object, revealing its worth through the processes outlined earlier in this chapter. We witness the timeline of the artwork stretching back through the object, intellectually crossing this distance and bringing ourselves 'closer' to it. This concept, and its relationship to the *aura* of the art object (as Walter Benjamin describes it) will be examined further in the third chapter of this study.

Consequently, it may be stated that in some sense Carey and others are right to label the value of artworks as *culturally constructed*, however, I would argue that such cultural constructions are themselves an integral (and intrinsic) component of the objects upon which they are built. Some books have pictures, but some pictures have books; the volumes of philosophical enquiry devoted to certain objects play a significant role in manifesting value within the objects themselves. The extent to which this can be achieved is telling of the artwork; could the same depth of academic discussion had of Shakespeare also be had of the aforementioned soap opera? It would seem unrealistic to propose this. Elitism is therefore vital, in its recognition of potential and its capacity to create the *Accumulative Value* that can render an object of cultural importance. If all creative works were seen as subjective in worth, as Carey attests to and seeks to encourage, then such significances would never materialise, we would have no Shakespeare, no Beethoven, no Michelangelo, no heroic figures, at least not in the guise of today. All would be equal in worth, their exceptionalism nullified. In the supposed bit for equality, Carey seeks to usher in an arid cultural desert.

As mentioned, the idealism and auteur visions of individuals such as Hayley (as well as Greenberg and Bell), seem somewhat antique today, and ill-suited to the myriad conflicting priorities that the arts look to be encumbered with. Such weakened positions of elitist authority can appear to have given way to a changed operational logic within some cultural organisations, and the implications of this for audiences (and their confrontations with the art object) are interesting to consider.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of May 2015, Manchester's new contemporary arts centre opened its doors, a new premises for the city's 'Cornerhouse' organisation, re-sited and renamed with the much-debated moniker, 'Home'. Quibbling over the connotations of an institution's adopted title may seem trivial, though the means by which this name was reached is perhaps more telling. 150 audience members, staff, artists and local communities were consulted to reach a consensus on a name that would reflect the character of the new organisation; as Home's website recounts:

Home was a reference point for much of the workshop discussions (second home, feeling at home, home of great work) and following discussions with staff and stakeholders it emerged as one of the strongest possible names for the organisation. It evokes accessibility, welcome and warmth, connection, a sense of ownership and personal relationships – all of which came out in our discussions with audiences as essential to the atmosphere and character of the new organisation.<sup>17</sup>

Rather than a strong internal vision that would define the organisation and its work, it can appear as though staff and stakeholders have regarded themselves as beholden to the whims of audiences, farming out the rationale of their new institution to a public committee. If the singular acumen of cultural elites still held sway as it once did, it may be argued that such a situation would be far less conceivable. The implications of this can be clearly observed in the language of the quote above, 'feeling at home', 'welcome and warmth'; are these really the conditions within which we apprehend an affecting encounter with the work of art? Moreover, does this depict an organisation that regards its work with intellectual seriousness, advocates learning and encourages challenging encounters? Arguably, such priorities are difficult to identify here.

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<sup>17</sup> This text can be accessed within the FAQ section of Home's website, here: <http://homemcr.org/about/faqs/>

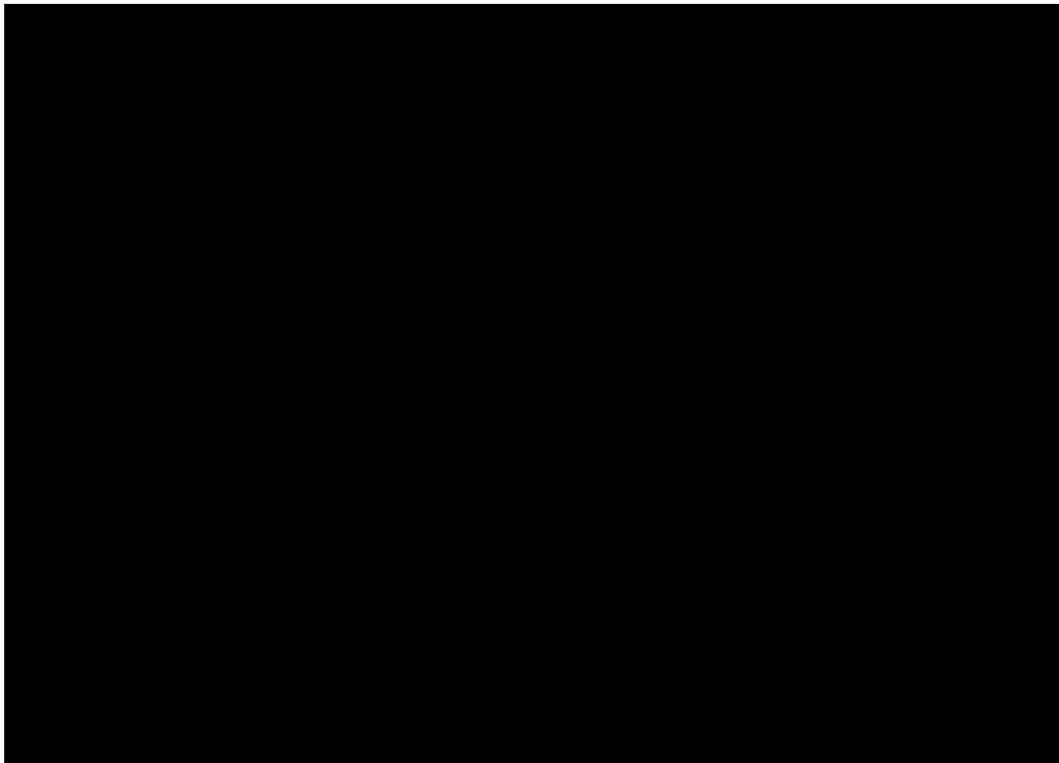
‘Home’ as a name can be regarded as emblematic, symptomatic, of a prevailing cultural condition. I would argue that in entering the art museum we are seeking a confrontation outside of everyday experience, not the domicile comforts alluded to here. Once again, in attempting to encourage wider participation and to bolster audience numbers, organisations can be seen to denature their workings, favouring inclusivity over principles and flattening out Hayley’s *cultural pyramid*. Reflecting this, a 2014 research project organised by educators at Tate, London, argued that ‘disruption, questioning and dialogue’ within the gallery may elicit ‘uncertainty and discomfort’ for some audiences, advocating ‘safe-spaces’ for validating learners in which staff ‘alert participants to the value and relevance of their own knowledge in relation to the art on show’ (Pringle & DeWitt 2014). What is clear from this is the understanding that ‘uncertainty and discomfort’ are of no pedagogic importance, a belief that may critically hamper learning and the dynamism of encounters with art as a whole.

Perhaps an alternative approach may be suggested here, a situation in which assurance, safety and complacency are replaced by exertion, danger and doubt; a situation that recognises the implicit value of confronting and overcoming challenges. As in the case of ‘Home’, offering audiences what they profess to *want* from an organisation curtails encounters that they may find difficult, complex and unsettling, we are naturally averse to such things but meaning, significance and changes of mind emerge through their surmounting. Furthermore, we cannot *want* something that we are, as yet, unaware of, institutions must hold the fortitude of will to present their own visions of art’s worth to audiences, igniting debate and disputation and not falling back upon the lowest common denominators of saccharine domesticity. The faceless, monolithic institutions whose image cultural organisations are so anxious to erase set a stage for meaningful experiences. We enter an alien environment, one set apart from everyday experience, feeling as imposters and speaking with hushed tones, an encounter of reverence and contemplation, instability and jeopardy; the object is on a pedestal, its worth enforced through its very existence in such a place.

The overcoming of difficulty is interesting to consider with regards to the process by which we innately assign value to our experiences. Religious pilgrimages assert the worth of the journey and the sacrifices that this can entail, the destination merely an incitement and arbitrary by comparison. Innumerable tribal rituals, trials and initiations from across the world and across ages demonstrate a consistent will

to impose a struggle, that in some way this has a revelatory or transformative potential, strengthening the character of those who undertake it.

In 1565, Carlo Borromeo was ordained as Archbishop of Milan, a fiercely pious man who became a dominant figure in the city during the youth of the artist Caravaggio. Borromeo sought to curtail various trends in artistic expression, disavowing all forms of painted imagery that he did not hold to serve some religious imperative. However, Borromeo held a particular fondness for theatricality, seeing the arts as a means by which biblical narratives could be animated in the present day and in the most vivid and visceral way possible. In service of this, Borromeo staged a number of acts of public religious ritual, forms of devout medieval performance art, basing many of these on the notion of the *sacro monte* (sacred mountain). Originating in the mountains above Varallo (in what is today the Piedmont region), the faithful would be enjoined to climb a fell slope, visiting a number of chapels that scattered the mountain pass. Within these, painted mannequin figures would be arranged in ways that expressed biblical stories and teachings; the longer and more arduous the climb, the more enlightened the individual would be deemed.



Giovanni d' Enrico (statues), Gaudenzio Ferrari (fresco) | **Lamentation over the Dead Christ** – Cappelle del Sacro Monte di Varallo | 1635 (Fig. 1.3)

Writing in his biography of Caravaggio, Andrew Graham-Dixon suggests that such images may have been ingrained into the memory of the young artist, helping to form his trademark gloomy and claustrophobic painted *mise-en-scène* (Graham-Dixon 2010). However, it is the notion of the journey, the climb of the *sacro monte* itself (and its revelatory potential) that is of key significance here. That it speaks to some vestigial ligature between the undertaking of a struggle and the attributions of worth to our own actions; the summit of the *sacro monte* is valueless without the mountain standing beneath it, value is a product of the climb itself. In consideration of our confrontations with the work of art, perhaps we can consider these in such a way

For it is not an attempt to enforce exclusivity to state that hierarchies exist, no matter how uncomfortable some may be with the admission of this perspective. On the contrary, it is in the tacit acknowledgement of such *strata* that one adopts the most democratic viewpoint possible. Only he who seeks to maintain ownership and control, or considers others to be *undeserving*, will deny that what he has is of a greater value, when the reality of this inequality is self-evident. This inequality moreover is vital, for without it, we cannot know value, we cannot comprehend that which rises above other things; the *will* to climb, to strive for the promise of the summit is lost if the mountain's very existence is denied to us. Hierarchy has much in common with *gravity* in this respect, we cannot see it, yet we feel its effects and understand them implicitly. Just as the climber feels increasing resistance, as the gradient of the ascent grows steeper, we sense our own struggle against the hierarchies of power and ideas; driven onwards by the knowledge of the plateau and heightened perspective that resides at the summit. We must be allowed *see* the mountain standing before us, without this awareness, the possibility and value within its ascent vanishes; we feel only the pressure of the incline, dragging us back to earth. When the existence of this strata is rejected and the assurance of the summit undermined, this pressure, this struggle, comes to be regarded as a valueless act, breeding lethargy, hostility and ultimately indifference. It is the *duty* of culture then, to hold aloft that which is of greatest value, to state without apology, the existence of that which stands above all others. Such things are a beacon, luminous across distance, one that must be pointed to without discrimination or disparity; for there will always be those who are drawn towards its light.

Museum and galleries have become guardians of objects and *ideas* in the world that our culture has

come to privilege above all others, raising them to that vaulted status that we define as *a work of art*. Once regarded as common labour, the acts of painting and sculpture (and the innumerable interdisciplinary practices that have spawned subsequently) have become sanctified endeavours; the creation of things that stand apart from other objects in the world. To this end, even the word 'artist' has become synonymous with a level of supremacy over a discipline; the great surgeon or gourmet chef adopting this label to denote excellence within their respective fields. Perhaps then, we may argue that the work of art is more than just a class of object that we lift into the upper echelons of culture, *more* than simply hierarchical, but the very essence of hierarchy itself. Art is a product of our will to revere, to idolise and to value, to realise an immaculate thought within a concrete form so that others may gaze upon it also; to create the finest thing that the constraints of the world will allow. Perhaps art, as such, is hierarchy incarnate.

The virtues of elitism manifest as an acknowledgement of art's inherent meaning, the recognition and celebration of excellence and the just meritocracy of a personal value cashed-out by the acquisition of knowledge. Perhaps it is naivety to pursue a cultural landscape of this kind in an age of lessened idealism, where conflicting priorities, mistrust of institutions and intellectual relativism hold sway. Yet, in the face of this, organisations must hold ever more tightly to such ideals if their ongoing positions of authority within the culture are to be secured. Asserting the eminence of both 'high art' and the vindicating pursuit of understanding in those that confront it; such is the utopian inequality of virtue-by-trial.

### **III. The question concerning technology**

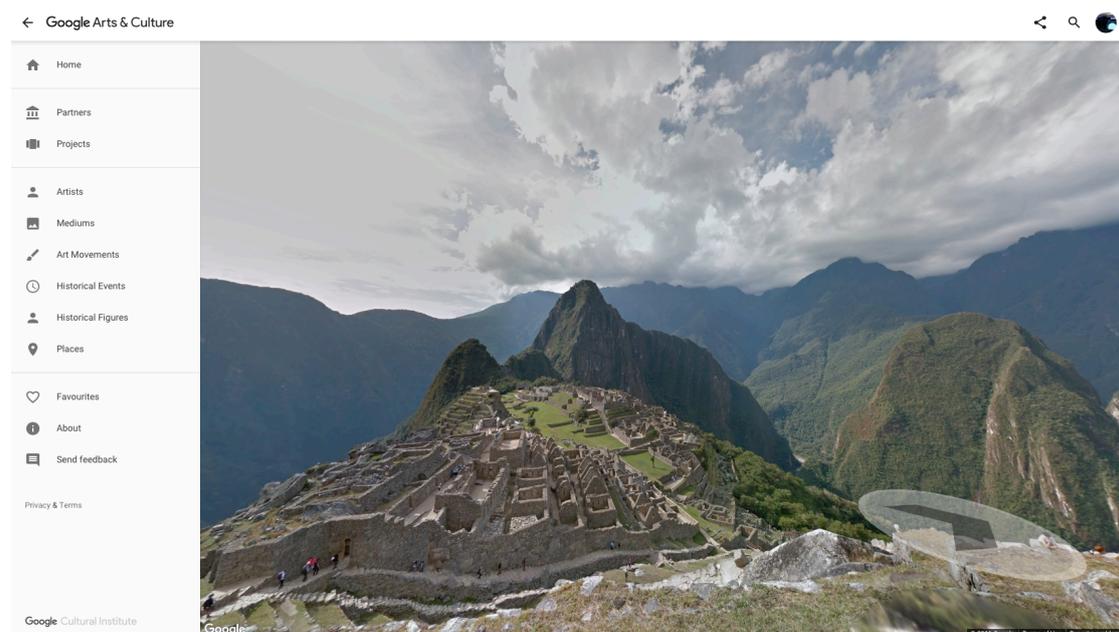
As the arts wilt under the relentless pressure from the experience of the mass electronic media, so the charge of elitism – in the sense of social and financial exclusiveness – will grow.

(Tusa 1999, p.25)

Tusa's comments here identify the capacities of technology to affect a significant change in cultural circumstances and the implications of this for wider public perceptions of the arts. Both the escalating

multiplicities in new forms of diversionary entertainments and the emergent platforms upon which these are permitted to be encountered are important to consider; technologies coming to offer both the means *and* the object of our experiences, the medium and the message. The motivations, processes and consequences of this shifted milieu will be assessed in detail within the fifth chapter of this study, however, I will consider here the impact of technological developments upon the specific cultural conditions outlined within this chapter; the roles undertaken by institutions, art's cultural identity, and the attribution of value to our confrontations with it.

To first tackle this notion of value, the process through which it is revealed by the individual and the constituent requirements for this to occur, perhaps we may return to the allegory of the mountain climb outlined in the previous section.



Google Arts & Culture | **Santuario Histórico de Machu Picchu** – Online Virtual Tour<sup>18</sup> | 2016 (Fig. 1.4)

The image above depicts the 15<sup>th</sup> century Incan citadel of Machu Picchu, sited 2,430M above sea-level in the Urubamba Province of Peru. The ruins are seen here as part of a Google virtual tour (utilising the company's 'Street View' technology) that is central to *Wonders of Machu Picchu*, an online exhibition of Incan artefacts and associated ethnographic histories. Users are invited to click their way along the

<sup>18</sup> This Virtual Tour can be accessed here: <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/streetview/santuario-historico-de-machu-picchu-historic-sanctuary-of-machu-picchu/1AGGN5NK82H9kA>

Inca trail, ascending the slopes in a navigable 360 degree panorama of collaged still images. We witness the spectacle of the landscape, and do so with immediate access to targeted information that frames the experience within a detailed historical context (permitting the form of *Accumulative Value* discussed earlier). With the contemporary ubiquity of wireless, Internet enabled devices, we are invited to enact this experience at our leisure (at any hour and location of our own choosing), spending as much or as little time here as we would wish to. Despite such egalitarian accessibility and convenience, it is surely unthinkable that an individual would value the experience of this digital simulacrum to the extent that they would a first-hand encounter; why though should this be the case? Perhaps the argument should be reversed, that we do not undervalue such encounters *in spite* of the comforts that technologies afford us, but because of them.

Let us leave aside for the moment the current discrepancies in sensory quality between the digital and the first-hand encounter, experiential disparities that are growing ever smaller with the present momentum behind commercial virtual reality (VR) hardware<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine a near-future scenario in which the digital replication of an experience is sensorially indistinguishable from its physical counterpart. In such a situation, it remains difficult to concede that a digital facsimile of an encounter will provide the weight of personal significance naturally ascribed to the authentic (the notion of *authenticity* being a key idea that will be examined in the fourth chapter of this work). In order to rationalise this, consider the simulated ascent of Machu Picchu; what is it that this encounter lacks over its physical equivalent? Two key points of divergence can be identified here, firstly, that the mountain ruins are divorced from context, their grounding at a specific and singular point in space. They are no longer scarce, no longer a dot on the horizon that we can strive towards, they exist in our domestic environments, in places of everyday experience, their facility to elicit *longing* is consumed by our unbounded proximity to them. Secondly, we surrender the climb itself, we surrender the validation of our own capabilities; the implicit personal value of surmounting an obstacle is lost. For the obstacle itself has been bypassed, we look out at a vista that has been captured by the toils of *others* and feel only indifference. In such ways we relinquish the causal mechanisms of discovering value, in the

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<sup>19</sup> Sony, Oculus and HTC have all launched VR headsets in 2016, with Microsoft's *HoloLens* being released to developers and many other companies preparing similar products to launch over the next few years.

pursuit of convenience. The citadel is plucked from its spatial moorings, existing everywhere and nowhere atop a mountain that technology climbs on our behalf.

More and more, digital encounters are coming to be regarded with levels of legitimacy that rival first-hand experience; consider today the proportion of communication that is carried out across digital mediums and the levels of worth we are coming to ascribe to digital objects<sup>20</sup>. The accessibility and conveniences that they allow may soon be seen as crucial enough to destabilise the understood superiority of first-hand experience; though I would argue that it is these very amenities that expel value from our contact with the world. One may propose that within a culture saturated by digital experiences, the perceived significance of the first-hand encounter would become elevated, a rare and increasingly prized endeavour. However, it is challenging to predict the ways in which emergent technologies will alter the cultural zeitgeist, and generations brought up with these as part of their perceived cultural landscape may adopt them without recourse to questioning their implications. In some ways, history can be seen to bear this out, and it is interesting to scrutinise the extent to which technologies have become a crutch, the effects of this upon our capabilities and the dangers this imposes if it were suddenly kicked from under us.

In a 2016 interview, ‘Mathematical Biologist’ David Krakauer reflects upon the cultural influence exerted by new technological devices and the impacts of this upon our abilities. Krakauer begins by using the term *Complimentary Cognitive Artefacts*, to classify a form of object that enables us to fulfil a specific task whilst extending our cognitive capacities (Krakauer using the examples of the abacus, the fork and the map). With the illustration of the abacus, Krakauer argues that through the sustained physical manipulation of this device, we can learn to manage numbers effectively, eventually creating a ‘virtual’ abacus within our own minds that forgoes the need for the physical object. Equally, with regular study of a map, we in time produce a mental image of its corresponding landscape and gain further tertiary benefits such as improved skills of spatial reasoning. However, Krakauer goes on to argue that not all objects elicit these cognitive enhancements and uses the corollary term *Competitive Cognitive Artefacts*, to describe such devices, those that may yield a negative influence.

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<sup>20</sup> As an example of this, in 2010 a set of virtual buildings in the massively multiplayer online (MMO) video game *Entropia Universe* sold for \$635,000. See: <http://www.therichest.com/rich-list/most-popular/10-of-the-most-expensive-virtual-items-in-video-games/>

Consider a mechanical calculator, or a digital calculator on your computer. It allows you, it augments your intelligence in the presence of the device, and so me and my phone are really smart, right? But if you take that away, you're certainly no better than you were before, and you're probably worse, because you probably forgot how to do long division because you are probably so dependant on your phone to do it for you [...] I'm simply pointing out the difference. And the difference is that these, what I call Competitive Cognitive Artefacts, don't so much amplify human representational ability but replace it."

(Krakauer 2016, 49:46)

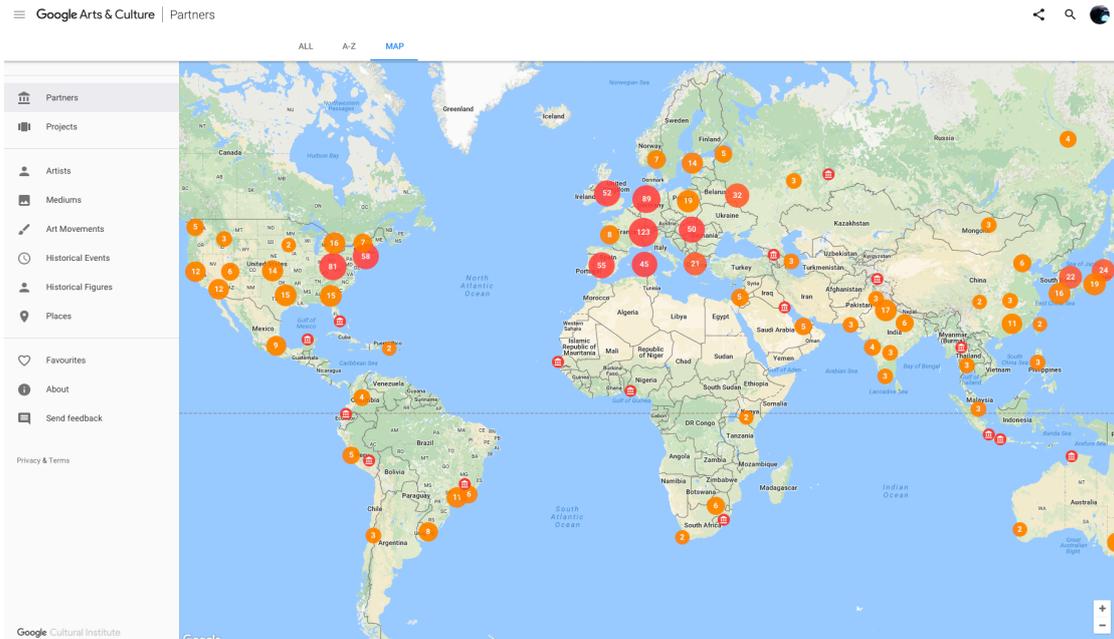
Parallels can be drawn here between Krakauer's notion of the *Competitive Cognitive Artefact*, and the ways in which technologies supplant our physical ascent of the slopes to Machu Picchu described earlier. We sacrifice the ability to physically relate to our experiences, to derive value from the exertions they pose, and to glean the tertiary cognitive (or even physical) growth that such activities encourage. The means by which our encounters are realised becomes increasingly obscurified, handed over to a technical system that is beyond the reach of our representational understanding. Simultaneously, we are granted access to the object, whilst becoming ever more detached from it, technologies shrinking the spaces between things without any recognition of the value that these distances provide. Furthermore, through the eradication of such distances and the uniformity of the technologies that enable this, our encounters are increasingly homogenised, we glimpse the world through the narrow lens of the computer screen, direct experience reduced to light and surface. As Friedrich Kittler writes:

The general digitization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media. Sound and image, voice and text are reduced to surface effects, known to consumers as interface. Sense and the senses turn into eyewash. [...] everything becomes a number: quantity without image, sound or voice. And once optical fibre networks turn formerly distinct

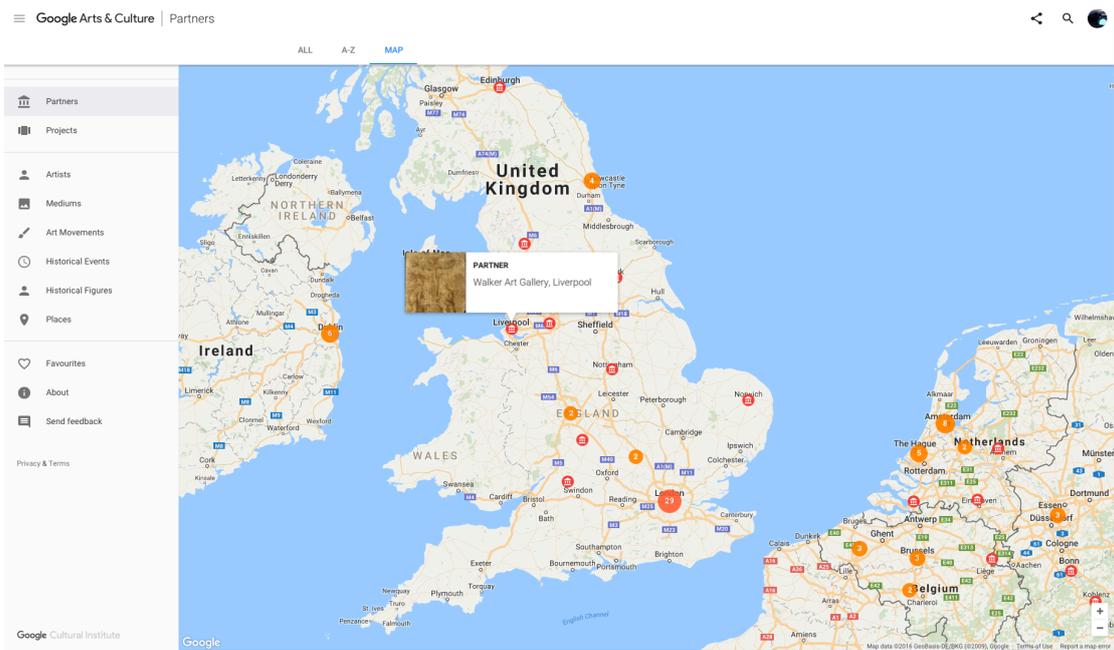
data flows into a standardized series of digitized numbers, any medium can be translated into any other.

(Kittler 1999, p.1)

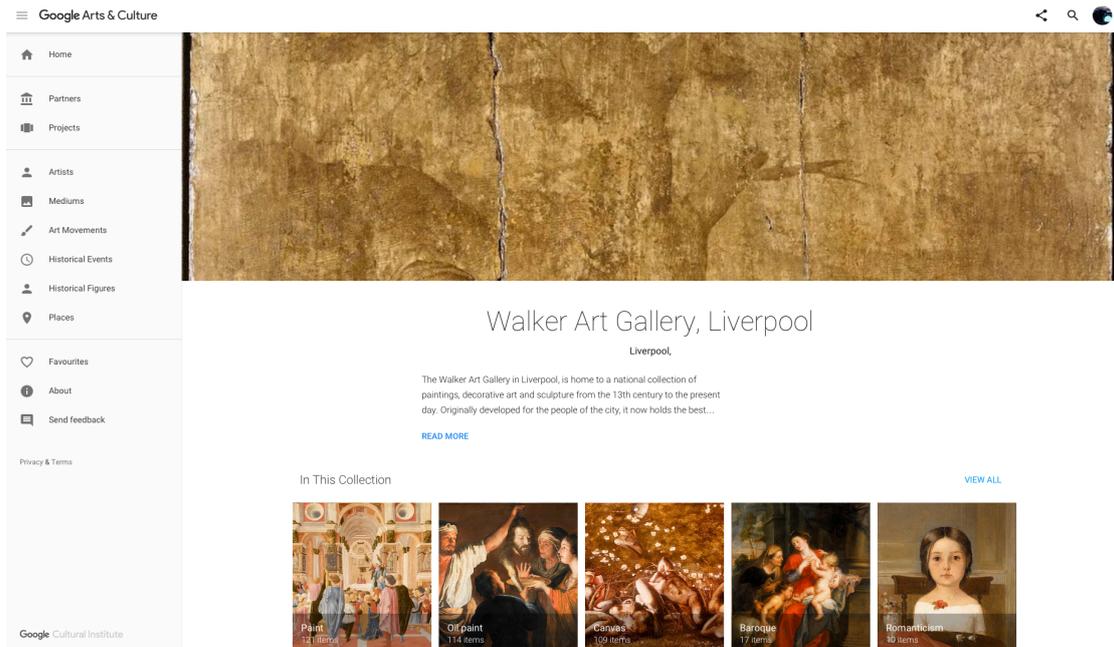
What implications does such homogenisation hold for our assignments of value to the art object and for the institutions that have traditionally framed these encounters? As has been suggested, the experience that is intimately tethered to a specific spatial location holds the qualities of the scarce, the unique and the challenging to reach, producing value in this encounter and lending degrees of authority to the institutions that contextualise it. However, it may be argued that in the age of digital information, context is in increasingly short supply. The accessibility offered by the online medium presents a considerable threat to the on-going relevance of physical institutions through the eradication of the distances that once separated us from them; no longer the sole proprietors of the objects once housed exclusively within their walls. For the walls of the museum have attained a flexibility in their architecture, extending outwards into innumerable potential locations. In such a way, there is nothing that can be seen to dismantle the 'monolith' of the art museum more than technology and its capacity to manipulate space. We have developed tools, and a cultural climate, that renders them permeable; and all through a singular medium that condenses our journey toward them into an immediate and homogenised experience.



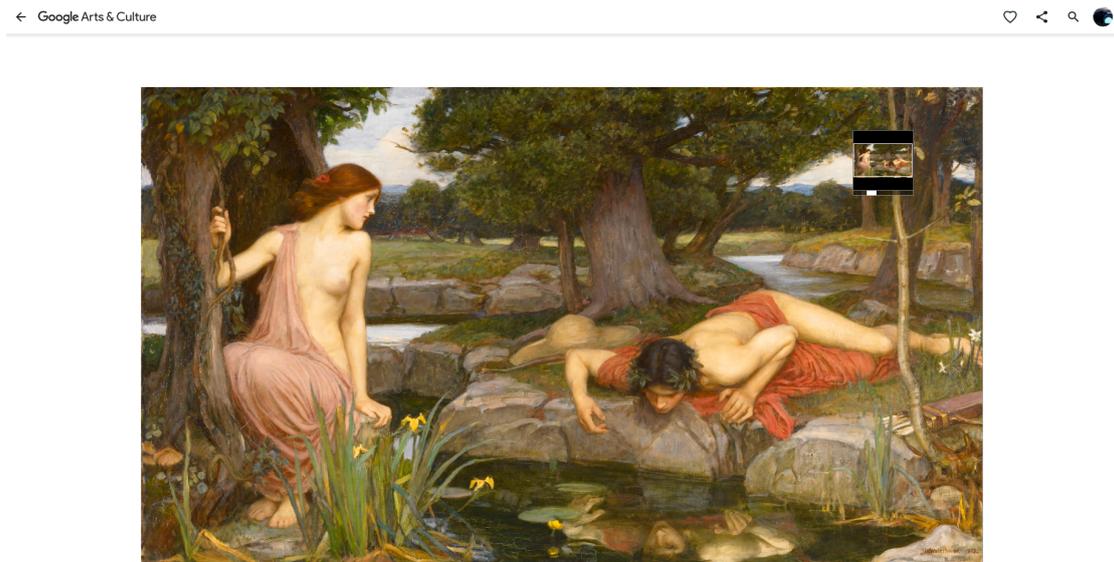
Google Arts & Culture | Partners – Web Browser View | 2016 (Fig. 1.5)



Google Arts & Culture | Partners (UK)– Web Browser View | 2016 (Fig. 1.6)



Google Arts & Culture | **Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool** – Web Browser View | 2016 (Fig. 1.7)



Google Arts & Culture | **Echo and Narcissus, John William Waterhouse (1903)** – Web Browser View | 2016 (Fig. 1.8)

The images above sequentially depict the journey towards a specific artwork, housed within a specific institution all through the medium of the Google Arts & Culture format. The desired painting (in this instance *Echo and Narcissus* by John William Waterhouse) can be zoomed into at a high resolution, revealing fantastic detail and enabling prolonged, uninterrupted examination in ways that would be impossible within a physical museum setting. Thus, as a tool for academic work (or similar

enterprises), such a platform is surely praiseworthy. Yet, such research-based utility rests upon a pre-existing acknowledgment of the object's value on behalf of the viewer, a perceived significance that the format alone is arguably unable to produce. As such, perhaps it may be suggested that platforms such as Google Arts & Culture allocate value to the tool itself (to the format's own facilities) far more than they do to the object of representation. It is therefore beholden upon the individual viewer to assess their own criteria of worth, interrogating the attributions of value to their experiences in the pursuit of understanding what makes for a meaningful encounter. Indeed, cultural institutions must also increasingly advocate this if their continued model as providers of first-hand, material encounters is to be sustainably assured. Context is the irreducible quality of the physical confrontation, that which cannot be subsumed by the workings of digital formats and their essentially uniform nature. The value of this (and the parameters it imposes) are fundamental to our appreciation of the art object, though despite this, its understood importance can be seen as increasingly at risk.

The Warwick Commission report (discussed earlier) exemplifies this, in its advocacy of a *Digital Public Space* that would seek to become an all-encompassing 'library' of the UK's cultural artefacts.

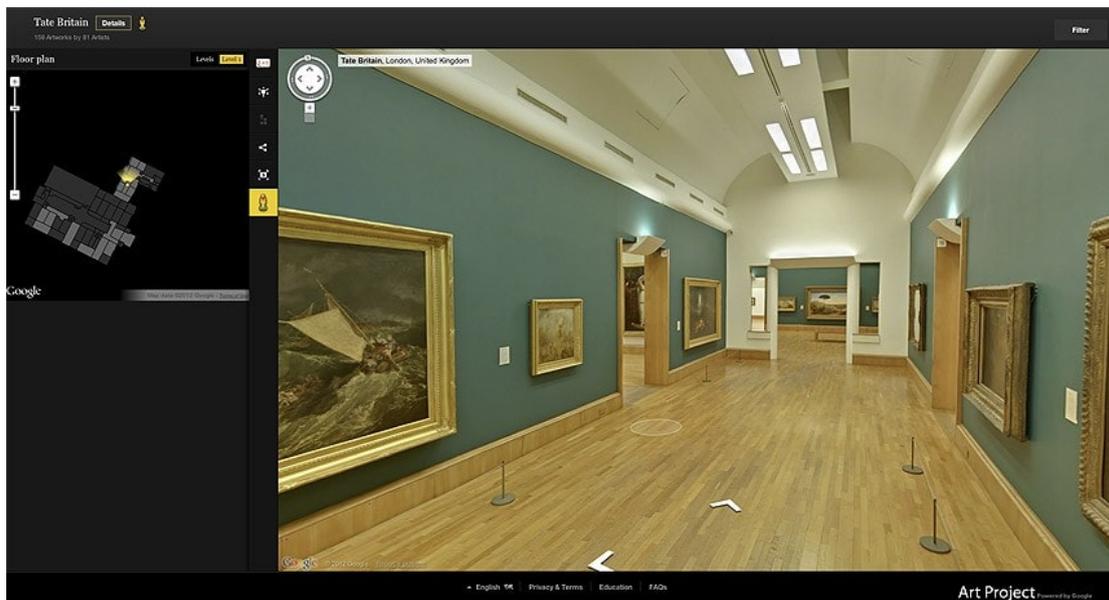
The Warwick Commission supports the creation of a Digital Public Space (DiPS), free from political and commercial interference and created solely for the public good. This would grow over time to become a kind of digital 'cultural library' of the UK's artistic and cultural assets, guaranteeing secure and equitable access to all forms of digitised content and resources. [...] The DiPS would provide a safe and secure environment in which everyone is empowered to assume their full and fulfilling role as digital cultural consumers

(Warwick Commission 2015, p.60)

In championing a DiPS of this kind, the authors of the Warwick Commission's report fail to question the implications that such a format may have for the cultural position of physical institutions and the merits that these hold over their digital counterparts. The egalitarian promise of this cultural database is clearly a motivating factor, however, this naturally comes at the price of undermining the imperative of an institutional context. Additionally, although not stated in the report, the extent to which economic interests may be of influence here is also important to consider. If digital spaces come to be regarded as

a satisfactory stage upon which we can ‘discover’ and ‘enjoy’ the arts, then the mandate for costly physical premises’ will undoubtedly erode, especially with their limited audience reach that is far exceeded by the scope of online demographics. Indeed, the digital audience member can be seen as the *ideal* one in overall consideration of the cultural leanings presented within this chapter; easily quantifiable, safe and in comfort, ostensibly diverse, inexpensive to accommodate, predictable, passive and unburdened by the pressures of hierarchy and elitism. Adrift in the void of digital space, all is equal, all is condensed into a shifting light show of RGB pixel values; our confrontations with the once-numinous are reduced to a click.

Nonetheless, our vestigial longing for ‘the real’ can still be evidenced within this, witnessed through the very act of replicating it digitally. We are drawn towards such experiences, knowing them as meaningful; the challenge facing culture today is to stridently declare why.



Google Art Project | **Tate Britain, London** – Web Browser View | 2012 (Fig.1.9)

This chapter has sought to assess the public justifications made for the arts by institutional authorities, how value is thought to be derived through such justifying measures and the cultural circumstances in which these have come to the fore. Having interrogated these measures, I have found myself critical of

the evaluative criteria so often employed here, and the tenor of this conversation (and its implicit assumptions) as a whole. As such, I have sought to expose (on some fundamental level) the processes by which we assign value to our encounters; that this may offer a starting point for reframing the discussion of art's worth in the public sphere. As outlined in the first section on this chapter, this discussion is often polarised by the tension between intrinsic and instrumental justifications for the merits of arts and culture, an argument between a perceived social utility (though one often spuriously evidenced) and an 'art for art's sake' mind-set that, all too easily, falls victim to negative charges of elitism and that mandates a society-wide cultural rapport (and a necessary cultural literacy) to be perennially sustainable. The debate is plagued by attempts to reconcile these two paradigms of worth, between which perhaps there exists little overlap, yet, it may be suggested that this in itself, this stalemate, can be seen as a positive. For it creates a necessity for the philosophical case for art's worth to be continually played-out, articulated, scrutinised and refined. Such conflicts yield an 'arms-race' of ideas (a condition that perhaps this study is itself a manifestation of), compounding a sense of vibrancy and urgency within this area of discourse. The extent to which such discussions can permeate culture at-large is admittedly questionable, though I believe a strong case can be made, one advocating for cultural organisations to confront these questions (of art's value and consequently the value of their own activities) in a far more direct, honest and public-facing fashion. Then perhaps, the understood imperative of instrumental claims may begin to subside.

It is perhaps telling however, just how challenging it is to find *any* public cultural authorities that do not strongly advocate, if not actively employ, instrumental measures within their literature, or offer any dissenting voices to such claims. One example of this however can be seen in a public *provocation* commissioned by Arts Council Ireland in 2007, written by a (somewhat controversial) journalist, Emer O'Kelly, stating that:

It has also to do with the determined belief in equality, a fierce resentment that anyone should be regarded as superior. Previous generations gave respect to their artists as the elite who pointed to the stars when even the artists themselves may have been languishing in the gutter. And their work helped the rest of us to raise our eyes at least as far as the rooftops.

[...] The Amateur Drama Group plays to a rapturous audience of friends and relations, and those on both sides of the curtain feel that their cultural requirements have been met. It's easy, it's enjoyable, it makes no demands, and it is sociologically valuable. But it is not art; indeed it discourages those participating from exploring the world of art. It ends up making art a branch of the social services.

(O'Kelly 2007)

Whilst I would not concede to *all* of O'Kelly's assertions here, the liabilities ascribed to instrumentalism, and the potential of this shift in priority to debase the work of art are important to consider. ACE's mantra of 'Great art and culture for everyone'<sup>21</sup>, is perhaps an increasingly fraught proposition if such justifications are to indefinitely subsist.

What is more, the metrics by which many publically funded UK organisations (such as National Museums) are required to justify their allocation of finance can be seen to create an overwhelming imperative for institutions; that of *entertainment*. The Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) requests only two key performance indicators, *visitor numbers* and *earned revenue*. Can we imagine a cultural landscape in which *these* are the overriding priorities? As Neil and Phillip Kotler write in consummation of this:

[...] converting museums into mere entertainment centers renders them no different from ordinary entertainment media and robs them of their primary educational purpose. Once museums lose their distinctive core mission, they will have to compete in the marketplace with the entertainment industry, whose resources are far more substantial. Competing as entertainment arenas will not provide museums with a level playing field; on the contrary, museums will have to compete with real entertainment products and they are likely to be perceived as second-rate in comparison.

(Kotler & Kotler, 2000 p.284)

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<sup>21</sup> See: <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/about-us/our-mission-and-strategy>

In justifying culture by its accessibility, inclusivity, by equality and equitability, we are veering towards a circumstance in which entertainment of the masses takes precedence; the once-revered reduced to depthless spectacle, the worth of the *challenging* side-lined for the resumption of mere convenience.

## PREFACE TO CHAPTER II

### **Turning Down Prometheus: on the maintenance of values in a Brave New World**

‘But I like the inconveniences.’

‘We don’t,’ said the Controller. ‘We prefer to do things comfortably.’

‘But I don’t want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin.’

‘In fact,’ said Mustapha Mond, ‘you’re claiming the right to be unhappy.’

‘All right, then,’ said the Savage defiantly, ‘I’m claiming the right to be unhappy.’

‘Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen tomorrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind.’

There was a long silence.

‘I claim them all,’ said the Savage at last.

Mustapha Mond shrugged his shoulders. ‘You’re welcome,’ he said.

(Huxley 2007, pp. 211-212)

Often compared with George Orwell's 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' (Orwell 1989), Aldous Huxley's inter-war novel 'Brave New World' presents a satire-future in which technologies have been instrumentalised in the formation of a new social consciousness. These two novels reflect the grand European social projects of the early Twentieth Century (of Imperialism, Fascism and Communism), both critiquing the rhetoric by which these *utopian* experiments<sup>22</sup> were defined and offering extreme future scenarios in assessment of their possible implications. Yet, unlike Orwell's dystopian autocracy, depicting a closed-state of ceaseless governmental surveillance, censorship and violence, Huxley's writing offers a contrasting model of centralised social control, one based, not on terror, but pleasure, in which technology has developed to provide unending fulfilment of all human desires. A radical consumerism based on the tenets of Henry Ford<sup>23</sup> (depicted as a divine figure in the fictional World State) grants Huxley's populace a life of interminable material luxury, leisure, sexual gratification, physical immunity (from disease and the decline of age) and drug induced euphoria. Despite this, for the novel's protagonist, such an existence proves unfulfilling, his *wants* seem to derive from elsewhere, and it is the question of this *where* that renders Huxley's novel as a pertinent illustration when we begin to examine the deeper nature of value in light of the cultural circumstances and practice based examples explored to this point.

Technologies shrink the gap between *wanting* and *having*, the distance between the two becoming progressively shortened (or in revolutionary cases) suddenly eradicated. Portraying this, the inhabitants of Huxley's 'Brave New World' demand from technologies immediate gratification in all of their appetites, the pursuit of which they regard as their highest moral objective. The novel is littered with hypnotic state-sanctioned mantras that extoll the virtues of rampant consumerism and its prerequisite of mass-production, for example: "'But old clothes are beastly,' continued the untiring whisper. 'We always throw away old clothes. Ending is better than mending, ending is better than mending, ending is better than mending.'" (Huxley 2007, p.42). So to, the rapid efficiency of advanced transportation is regarded as one's uncontested entitlement, one scene voicing a character's disgruntlement at a delay of

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<sup>22</sup> The word 'experiment' is of particular significance in Orwell's writing and his dissection of political language in order to infer concealed meaning. The wording of 'The Great Soviet Experiment', introduced by Stalin in 1928 (for the construction of a socialist economy), is highlighted in Orwell's writing, as an *experiment* is not something to which human beings should be subjected from the majority of ethical standpoints. Indeed, so uncomfortable are we with this proposition that we instead carry out experiments on lives that we consider to be of a far lesser value, those of animals; hence the allegory of Orwell's earlier novel 'Animal Farm' (Orwell 1945).

<sup>23</sup> Henry Ford (July 30, 1863 – April 7, 1947) - American industrialist, founder of the Ford Motor Company and sponsor of the developments behind the automated assembly line and subsequent techniques of mass production.

‘forty seconds on a six and a half hour flight’ (Huxley 2007, p.86), irritation from a minute interval in crossing a distance that would once have been impassable. Such instances identify a shift in the goals, moralities and values that pervade Huxley’s fictional universe from those of the writer’s own time, and suggest his conception of the social implications brought on by the technological progression that he was witness to; the *means* of technologies coming to reshape perceptions of their respective *ends*.

Huxley’s imagined state mirrors the character of the ‘Technopoly’, as defined by Neil Postman in ‘Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology’ (Postman 1992), a society that deifies technologies to the extent that “the culture seeks its authorisation in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology”. Such a culture is typified by a surplus of information generated by technology, which technological tools are in turn employed to cope with, in order to provide direction and purpose for society and individuals (Postman 1992, pp. 71-72). Postman regards cultures of the world today to be nearing such a socio-technologic state, by which we increasingly come to understand the world against the shifting backdrop of the prevailing technological landscape, our values, aspirations and conceptions of *self* becoming altered by extension. To Postman, the Technopoly demands the ‘submission of all forms of cultural life to the sovereignty of technique and technology’ (Postman 1992 p.52) a proposal with ramifications to echo Marshall McLuhan’s famous adage: ‘We become what we behold. We shape our tools and then our tools shape us’<sup>24</sup>.

Let us consider this *mirroring* that is expressed by McLuhan’s maxim. Technologies are a product of design, created in order to pursue an objective and demonstrating a wilful confrontation of (and dissatisfaction with) a perceived limitation in our current capacities. In such a way, the technologies we build reflect our own desires back at us; we can comprehend our *wants* by the facilities of that which we strive to create. Significance, priority and aspiration are embedded in even the most innocuous devices, echoing a ceaseless drive toward advancing our abilities. Yet subsequently, how do we regard the image of *ourselves* that we see reflected by the technologies we have built? Perhaps it is no longer a depiction of a character that we can recognise as *us*. The desire that drove the device’s creation is fulfilled and nullified; the world around us, the context against which we define ourselves, is suddenly

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<sup>24</sup> Although often attributed to McLuhan, this quote actually originates with Father John Culkin a friend of McLuhan and a professor of communication. However it is widely considered as McLuhan’s concept due to its consistency with his other writing and appearance in an article examining his work: Culkin, J.M. (1967, March 18). A schoolman’s guide to Marshall McLuhan. Saturday Review, pp. 51-53, 71-72

changed and we enter a world in which that *desire* has become an irrelevance. We attain an altered self-perception, one based upon a mirror image that we come to act in accordance with; no longer defining ourselves by the pursuit of our desires but forced to define ourselves through the consequences of their accomplishment. In short, we become a product of this technological landscape.

This is the Brave New World that Huxley feared and the cultural zeitgeist of Postman's Technopoly. A cage of our own making that undermines the derivation of meaning and value within our experiences; the unchallenged drive for technological progression superseding its cultural implications. Like Huxley's characters, we snatch the immediate gratification that technologies offer, giving little thought to the significance such things may once of held, or to the desires that brought about the technology itself. 'Our tools shape us', by enabling passivity and stolid, unbound consumption, our desires are handed to us and rendered valueless in the process, we lose the opportunity to realise their true worth. Here perhaps, in the view of ourselves as reflected by the technology we create, a disturbing proposition can be raised; that we slide ever closer toward insentience and inertia, forsaking the requirement of our body and mind for the meaningful achievement of our wants. That we become as machines, reflections *of them*, a conduit for cold consumption, revering convenience at the cost of significance.

The narrative dialogue at the beginning of this text presents the finale of a confrontation between two of Brave New World's predominant characters; Mustapha Mond, resident controller of Western Europe for Huxley's World State and John the Savage<sup>25</sup>, an outcast from rural New Mexico that is brought to the *civilised world* and whom we follow as he experiences Huxley's utopia for the first time. The encroaching antipathy John feels for the civilisation's moral tenets are slowly revealed and come to a head within this conflict as a frantic and desperate plea to the Controller. We read John's imploration as a yearning for obstacles to be instilled in the pursuit of his own happiness, many of which can appear as outright masochism: "the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat". Yet through this, Huxley reveals two precepts that galvanise his character's conception of value; firstly, its emergence through the overcoming of difficulty, and subsequently, that it cannot *exist* in the absence of this challenge, that it is a thing that can only be earned. Huxley uses the extremity of John's

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<sup>25</sup> Some critics regard the character of John the Savage as a spokesperson for Huxley's own views, critiquing the artificial life of the world state. Yet he is far from a wholly heroic figure and (as Huxley highlights in his foreword) his earlier life outside of the 'civilised' world is equally squalid, complicating this position (Huxley 2007, foreword).

willingness for struggle as a counter-weight to the extreme placated comfort of his civilisation's masses, suggesting that through technologically enabled indulgences they have lost the appetite and aptitude to even comprehend the values that John espouses so fiercely. It is here that we witness the sharp divide between Huxley's novel and 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', in the methods by which the respective societies are subordinated and the divergent implications this has for the central protagonist's values in both works. As Postman writes in his foreword to 'Amusing Ourselves to Death' (Postman 1985):

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egotism [...] In 1984, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In Brave New World, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we fear will ruin us. Huxley feared that our desire will ruin us.

(Postman 1985, foreword)

From which proclamation do *we* have most to fear? Perhaps the answer resides in a consideration of in which of these universes we would *choose* to belong if pushed. It is difficult to envisage a world of more abject horror than that of Orwell's satire, indeed the rationale of the party's interrogatory chamber 'Room 101'<sup>26</sup> is the realisation of a personal, and unendurable vision of hell, tailored to inflict the maximum abuse upon each individual's psyche. An impoverished life of perpetual surveillance, state propaganda, isolation, injustice and terror with an obligation to propound endless praise upon the party and its leadership. Conversely, the Brave New World offers us a state of opulent bliss, one that many would regard as paradise, hedonistic decadence, recreation and protection for the summation of one's existence. Superficially, the decision is self-evident, however, it is only in *Huxley's* novel that civilization is forced to relinquish the values that are held above all others. Against all of the oppression, cruelty and deceit, Nineteen Eighty-Four's protagonist (Winston Smith) clings ever more tightly to a heightened conception of the values he is denied, of love, expression, liberty and truth, the

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<sup>26</sup> Following his arrest, Winston is told the secret of 'Room 101': "'You asked me once,' said O'Brien, 'what was in Room 101. I told you that you knew the answer already. Everyone knows it. The thing in Room 101 is the worst thing in the world.'" (Orwell 1989, p.296)

faintest glimmers of which achieve a crushing weight of personal significance as a result of their prohibition. It is only in the Brave New World that these ideals are reduced to worthless relics, the very concepts disfigured and undermined. A truth that is stolen can be reclaimed; only one that is willingly surrendered has lost its meaning conclusively.

It is perhaps telling, the extent to which Orwell's iconography has permeated popular culture, the visions of 'Big Brother, 'Room 101' and the 'Thought Police' becoming archetypal in the prevailing critique of contemporary societies. Paranoia and state-scepticism are compounded by closed-circuit surveillance, mistrust of established institutions (fuelled by economic irresponsibility and questionable media ethics among others) and growing concern over the privacy and usage of our personal data<sup>27</sup>. Despite this, one may argue that it is difficult to honestly regard Orwell's nightmare as manifest in developed Western societies, the freedoms, luxuries and entitlements we assume make it difficult to assert this with any moral seriousness. And whilst pockets of the world (North Korea<sup>28</sup> conspicuously) do echo the closed-state of Nineteen Eighty-Four, *we* cannot truly identify with the abominations of such a situation. Yet, in some sense, perhaps we wish to, to righteously rail against some external tormentor, a faceless Machiavellian spectre, but one whom, like Orwell's 'Big Brother', simply does not exist. Perhaps the reality of our situation is less palatable and less readily accepted, that it is the Brave New World that better illustrates our times, that our circumstances are chosen and our conflicts internal, that the things we create may soften our ideals; that we must reaffirm the roots and direction of our desires for the realisation of what it is that we truly value.

We desire most that which we do not have. The engorged raft of possessions bestowed upon Huxley's populace reveals in compelling disparity the sparse material deprivation of life in Nineteen Eighty-Four. Yet for Winston, the mere ownership of an illicit diary, an object tragic in its simplicity, attains a sacred and overwhelming significance, a value climbing far above the unthinking excesses of the Brave New World. Within its pages Winston Writes:

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<sup>27</sup> The National Security Agency (NSA) disclosures of Edward Snowden are of particular relevance to this – igniting debates over mass surveillance, governmental secrecy and information privacy.

<sup>28</sup> In addition to its policies of censorship, party propaganda and expressions of militarism, North Korea's leadership has a further correlation with Orwell's imagined society. Despite his death in 1994, Kim Il-Sung remains the official head of state, becoming an abstract (and as such unchallengeable) figure, akin to Orwell's 'Big Brother'.

Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows<sup>29</sup>

(Orwell 1989, p.84)

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<sup>29</sup> Again, this repeated phrase demonstrates Orwell's attack upon the rhetoric of 'The Great Soviet Experiment'. Stalin's plan was stated to take place over five years, after four (and in the wake of catastrophic failures) it was heralded by the party as a complete success, hence Orwell's assertion that within the distorted logic of totalitarian regimes two plus two can be made to equal five.



CHAPTER

II

# VALUE AND VALUES

## **Introduction**

In light of the examples outlined within the previous chapter, this chapter will interrogate the fundamental characteristics of ‘value’ more deeply through a methodology of philosophical enquiry. The defining attributes of this notion will be explored, alongside its varying interpretations, leading to the formulation of a reasoned interpretation that will expound the term’s use within this work. What do we mean by ‘value’ and how can we classify its nature (in the ontological sense), what is the veracity of the claims we make towards it (in terms of epistemology) and what elements engender it within our (phenomenological) lived experience of the world.

Firstly, the etymology of the words ‘value’ and ‘values’ will be examined, considering the root derivations of these terms and the reciprocal relationship that exists between the two in their contemporary usage. What is the process by which our ‘values’ (our standards of worth in a broad sense) guide the attributions of significance to our encounters and are these criteria specific to certain phenomena or do they form part of some wider set of ideals? In consideration of this, in which circumstances, in what modes of philosophical discussion, does valuation factor most prominently and what can be inferred from this about its essential characteristics?

Following this, the opposition between objective and subjective measures of valuation will be analysed in depth, building upon the discussion of art’s often-perceived subjectivity that was begun in the first chapter of this study. With the litany of (often highly discrepant) philosophical perspectives that have sought to tackle this polarising question, what key points of divergence can be identified and can any consistencies be drawn in the understood nature of value that may (to some degree) unify such diverse interpretations? Ultimately, in consummation of the core debates in this area, which standpoint do we consider to be the most defensible?

In reaching a reasoned position upon this issue, I will further explore my rationale, articulating a personal conception of value’s essential nature that will contextualise the debate in the following chapters. Tackling the proposition of some form of objective valuation, this section will question the extent to which such claims can be made and on what grounds. Central to this discussion will be the

question; can evaluative statement ever be considered ‘true’, and if so, what fundamental basis can be proposed for this?

Lastly, I will further analyse the phenomenological elements that contribute to our attributions of worth (such as scarcity) questioning the extent to which these may in-part inform our wider comprehensions of ethical or aesthetic significance. Such questions will be introduced here (grounded within our discussions of value) and explored in greater depth within the following chapter (four).

## **I. Etymology**

It must first be acknowledged that any universal, all-encompassing definition of the terms ‘value’ or ‘values’ is a fraught proposition and one that extends far beyond the scope of this study. These are hugely multi-faceted concepts that emerge in practically all domains of discourse and as such their definitions have formed the basis of countless debates stretching back across antiquity. Nevertheless, in concluding this chapter I will produce a reasoned explanation, backed by relevant discussion and sources, for a description of these overlapping concepts that will define their usage within this particular study. This definition will be dissected and its implications scrutinised, being one that is highly spelled-out yet with a breadth of scope in order to accommodate its requirements as the foundational concept within this work. Perhaps here it is worth reiterating to the reader that what is described in this chapter is not the proclamation of any defined worth or principle (in relation to the arts), but a rationale for articulating the very notion of *value* itself; though conceivably it may be argued that with an inescapable irony that it is one’s own values that steer the formation of such a definition.

Regarding the scope of these terms and their usage within this study, I will begin by discounting a definition of value that will not be of direct relevance to this work; that pertaining to a numerical *quantity*, in the purely mathematical or scientific sense. The idea of *mathematical absolutes* (that the number ‘2’ for example is comprised of two distinct units of *value*) is not directly of consequence and as such the solely statistical uses of the term can be disregarded. Instead, what will be focused upon is ‘value’ as it relates to the notion of *worth*, in the philosophical sense, principally within ethics and

aesthetics. The overarching term often used for this branch of enquiry is ‘Axiology<sup>30</sup>’ (Hart 1971), denoting either the collective consideration of ethics and aesthetics (fields that depend crucially upon notions of value judgement) or sometimes used to describe the foundation of these fields (with a meaning closer to that of value theory (Dewey 1939) or meta-ethics (Garner & Rosen 1967)). Indeed, the links *between* ethical and aesthetic concerns are interesting to consider and these can be identified as we begin to examine the idea of ‘value’ from this axiological perspective.

Let us first examine the etymology of the term, the ascriptions embedded within its origins and the supplementation of meaning that has built towards its present usage. Derived from the Latin *valere*<sup>31</sup>, ‘be strong, be well, be of value’, we see the term’s rudimentary connection to the concepts of valiance or valour<sup>32</sup>, denoting a demonstration of courage, effort or worthiness, with connotations of the heroic. The fact of this connection is itself significant, and one that further conveys the complexity in arriving at a description of ‘value’ that is free from any preconceived moral standpoint. The perceived virtues of bravery, capability and endeavour are enshrined within the word itself, without recourse to the questioning of *if* these things are valuable and *why* they may be so. An implication is also made that these qualities should be regarded as objective and *universally good*, acting as a yardstick against which all values can be judged. Whilst we may well consider the asset of valour to be highly desirable, in ourselves and others, our conception of value’s meaning must be unprescriptive of any definable ethical ideal. This is due to the relative nature of value judgement (in the personal or cultural sense), that it is based upon alterable, subjective sensibilities that cannot be anchored to any immovable precept; our definition therefore must be infinitely flexible, and free from the constraints of such prescribed content. Numerous philosophical arguments do however expound the notion of objective values, or *philosophical absolutes*, that exist independently *from* and irrespective *of* individual and cultural views. These two perspectives (that will be explored further in the coming paragraphs) are not however mutually excluding for the most part (the suggestion that some values may be absolute whilst others are relative) and thus our definition of value must be open to the consideration of both. The etymological relationship between value and valour is no longer acknowledged in common vernacular,

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<sup>30</sup> Sourced from Merriam-Webster.com definition – ‘axiology’. “The study of the nature, types, and criteria of values and of value judgments especially in ethics”. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/axiology> (accessed: January 10, 2015).

<sup>31</sup> Sourced from the Dictionary.com definition – “value”. Dictionary.com. Online Etymology Dictionary. Douglas Harper, Historian. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/value> (accessed: January 11, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Sourced from the Dictionary.com definition – “valiant”. Dictionary.com. Online Etymology Dictionary. Douglas Harper, Historian. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/valiant> (accessed: January 11, 2015).

the word value (and its inherent meaning) becoming far more malleable and pervasive, as evidenced by the breadth of scenarios to which this term is routinely applied.

Descriptively, one's 'values' may refer to the entirety of an individual's attitudes *for-or-against* anything (Edel 1953). Practically all decisions, judgements, aspirations and perspectives are formulated in accordance with the set of values that one holds and one's propensity for translating such attitudes into reasoned opinion or action. This includes what one; finds interesting or irrelevant, deems right or wrong (in the ethical sense), considers good or evil, finds desirable or repellent, regards as useful or useless, sees as beautiful or ugly, takes as worthy of praise or of damnation, ones goals, criteria of taste, standards of judgement, aversions, prejudices and priorities. Moreover, one does not merely *have* values, but is also continually required to make *value judgements* in assessment of them. As Edel writes:

For in every self-conscious choice that the individual makes, in every creative act as well as every criticism, whether economic, moral, aesthetic, or any other, there are assumptions about what is desirable as well as desired, preferable as well as preferred, appropriate standards as well as functioning standards, an so forth. The same is true of social decisions, even as embedded in the normal functioning of social institutions and agencies.

(Edel 1953. p.198)

Here we see Edel articulating a point of divergence between the 'thing that is valued' and the 'measures of its valuation'. Regarding this, we can perhaps, in a very broad sense, begin to outline the distinction between 'value' and 'values' and the reciprocal relationship that exists between the two. To assert that we *value* something is to signify that we favour it in some way and it is our *values* that are the criteria (that the thing fulfils) upon which this judgement is made. Value then, is the recognition of a significance, one that is a reflection of the values that we embrace. By way of an illustration, one may consider the idea of 'family' to be of high value to them, this may be a reflection of the values they have pertaining to their conception of a family's relationships, structure, function, roles, beliefs, attitudes and so on; regarding these as essentially *good*, and the notion of family as valuable by

extension. Equally, one may have a profound and valuable experience when listening to a piece of music, a piece that must match to some degree their appreciative sensibilities (aesthetic or otherwise) to produce this positive response. What then can be inferred from this intrinsic connection between our standards and our attributions of worth? That it is our *values* that, in all things, order the hierarchy of that which we are *for* and that which we are *against*, predetermining our responses to the world; in short, that value is a product of our values.

This could be regarded as a self-evident assertion; however, at this point it may be worth returning to the dual axiological fields of ethics and aesthetics, and to consider how this '*values = value*' model may be utilised. With one's values underpinning all ethical and aesthetic judgments, can we regard these two fields as being derived from a single, unified source? Are their motivations comparable, their criteria of worth interchangeable, or their cultural emergences of a similar character? Can we, as Wittgenstein suggests, declare that 'Ethics and aesthetics are one' (McGuinness & Pears [trans] 1961 p.147), discrepant realisations of a sole underlying ideal? For instance, do we consider an act of great justice to be exemplary of some aesthetic *beauty*; or conversely, can we perceive a form of *morality* to be manifest in the creation of a sculpted masterpiece? Such questions will be examined thoroughly within the conclusion of this study, however it is first important to explore the philosophical foundations of these ideas, and to further interrogate the crucial distinction that this requires between *objective* and *relative* interpretations of value that was begun in the first chapter.

## **II. Objective vs. subjective approaches**

Considering the vast field of phenomena to which our values are applied, valuation as a constant dimension to all of human experience, Edel regards 'value' as a fundamental philosophical category comparable to that of 'existence' (Edel 1953. p.200). This view is justified as we begin to assess the depth and range of philosophical debate surrounding the understanding of value and its nature. In his idea of a single conception of 'goodness' that embraces beauty, morality, politics, economics, religion and so on, Plato (c.428 – c.348 BCE) is widely regarded as the first to offer a general theory of value (Edel 1953. p.203), one that stresses his belief in an objective rationale for underpinning all human value judgement. In '*Theaetetus*' (c.369 BCE) Plato refutes relativistic approaches to conceiving

values, particularly through his opposition to the work of the first major relativist, pre-Socratic philosopher, Protagoras (c.490 – c.420 BCE) (McDowell [trans] 1973). In his work ‘*Truth*’ Protagoras had issued his famous statement “Man is the measure of all things” (in Blaban 1999), asserting that to measure something is to assign it with a value, Protagoras regarding all values, truth, good, beauty even existence, as dependant upon the human observer. Countering this position, Plato suggests a two-tier conception of reality, drawing a distinction between observable phenomena (that which can be perceived by the senses) and a higher *truth* of abstract, immaterial knowledge (or *noumena*<sup>33</sup>) that is known *without* the use of the physical senses. This is the basis of Plato’s *Theory of Forms* (Ross 1953) an idea proclaiming that it is such non-material (yet substantial) Forms (or concepts) that possess the highest and most fundamental kind of reality<sup>34</sup>. Plato argued that the human intellect and facilities of perception were limited (by sensory understanding) and subject to error, narrowing our appreciation of the universe. However, he claims that through the pursuit of knowledge and reasoned enquiry/reflection, we are able to form concepts that evoke the whole, eternal reality of existence. Writing in ‘*The Republic*’ (c.380 BCE) Plato offers two resonant images that articulate his notion of a dual-layered reality (Jowett [trans] 2008); one of which is known as *the divided line*:



The attributes above the line are those Plato considers manifestations of *objective* reality; below are the experiential conditions of *relative* reality. He regards the human condition as characterised by the lower level, but that we have the capacity to aspire to the attributes of the higher strata. In Plato’s view, philosophical relativism is a confusion between everyday experience (due to sensory or intellectual

<sup>33</sup> The concept of ‘noumena’ (Popularised by Kant in ‘*The Critique Of Pure Reason*’ (Meiklejohn [trans] 2010)) refers to a Platonic object that is unobservable by the senses. In such a way it is the opposite of ‘phenomena’ which are observable, physical objects, events or manifestations.

<sup>34</sup> Plato speaks of these entities only through the characters (primarily Socrates) of his dialogues who sometimes suggest that these Forms are the only true objects of study that can provide us with genuine knowledge; thus even apart from the very controversial status of the theory, Plato’s own views of it are much in doubt (Watt 1997, Introduction).

limitations) and the eternal, universal truths of the upper level; that the objective values of the good, the just and the virtuous are aspects (*Forms*) of a static reality that exists beyond an individual's subjectivity. To Plato, any wrongdoing committed by an individual stems from a lack of knowledge of these *higher truths*, a recurring notion in his writing that regards evil as a form of manifest ignorance. This accounts for Plato's elevated conception of Philosophy as a social agent, that it is the effort to improve one's existence through a revealed understanding of goodness and truth.

This idea is expressed most vividly in the seventh book of Plato's Republic through a dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon. This is the allegory of 'The Cave' that has achieved a lasting cultural impact, influencing numerous literary titles and popular contemporary films such as *Dark City* (1998), *The Truman Show* (1998) and *The Matrix* (1999) (Irwin 2002). These titles share a common narrative arc whereby a protagonist comes to question the validity of their own reality and slowly uncovers further *layers* of existence beyond their own, undertaking a journey of discovery and confronting an expanded conception of the world; this, in essence, is the thrust of Plato's metaphor. Plato has Socrates describe a community of prisoners who have lived their entire lives chained to the inside of a cave, all of them facing inwards at a blank wall and unable to look away. Restricted to this one viewpoint, the prisoners can only see the shadows of people and objects that pass the opening of the cave; they take to naming these shadows, phantom objects that are as close as the prisoners get to viewing reality. Rather, the shadows *are* the prisoner's reality, having known nothing else and accepting their own viewpoints as fact. Socrates then describes one captive being freed from the cave and sent out into the daylight; he depicts the prisoner's initial pain and confusion at the outside world, followed by an acceptance of this new reality and a growing pity for the others still trapped in the dark.

**Socrates:** And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he is forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.

**Glaucon:** Not all in a moment, he said.

**Socrates:** He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then

the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day?

[...]

**Socrates:** And when he remembered his old habitation, and the wisdom of the den and his fellow-prisoners, do you not suppose that he would felicitate himself on the change, and pity them?

(Jowett [trans] 2008, Book VII)

Here we see in stark depiction, Plato's conception of objective axiological *truths* and the requirement of a defiant and determined effort to comprehend the upper echelons of his divided line. Nettleship regards this allegory in such a way, interpreting Plato's metaphor as one about human ignorance and a people who are unable or unwilling to seek truth and wisdom for themselves (Nettleship 1922). Whereas, Ferguson elucidates a more politically focused interpretation, describing the allegory as a critique of the ways in which rulers, without a strong philosophical mindset, manipulate the human population (Ferguson 1922). Regardless of these specifics, Plato's vision illustrates a conception of permanent and universal metaphysical ideals, forms of uncontested *goodness* or *absolute values* that can (and should) be reached for by human beings. It is important to note, that Plato does not deny the *existence* of relative value judgment, indeed he sees this as a constant process through which we interpret our sensory understandings of the world, however, what this does is narrow our vision and confuse the process of identifying objective moral facts. This acknowledgement, of the relative nature of value, combined with assertions of a *higher*, and independent set of ideals is a recurring structure running through all subsequent arguments for the designation of objective measures of *good*, many of which are firmly grounded in a Platonic model of reasoning.

For example: some strands of *utilitarianism* and *consequentialism*, two overlapping theories holding that the outcome of an action can be used as an objective measure of its value, or taken to an extreme, that in all cases "the ends justify the means", (Bentham 1776, Mill 2004), *contractualism*, a theory suggesting that there are abstract and universally understood agreements, or contracts, created between

human beings and their fulfillment is always the *right* course of action for one to take (Rawls 1971, Scanlon 1998), *ethical egoism*<sup>35</sup>, proclaiming that one's self interest should form the basis of their value judgments (Smith 2000, Waller 2004), *moral realism* (or *ethical realism*) asserting that ethical propositions express objective features of the world (independent of subjective opinion) proponents of this position often taking a scientific approach and seeking the foundations of value judgments in Darwinian natural selection and its necessary survival strategies (Moore 1925, Railton 2003), attempts at an objective rationale for valuation in aesthetic judgments (Schellekens 2003) and the philosophy of *objectivism* founded in the controversial novels and essays of Ayn Rand (Rand 2007, Rand 1992) and later structured more formally by Leonard Peikoff (Peikoff 1989) an ideology of radical individualism that attacks the notion of altruism (for being not in ones self-interest, non-rational and therefore morally wrong) and that holds a vaulted belief in capitalism with numerous conservative libertarian exponents<sup>36</sup>.

Another area in which claims to objective values are routinely made is within the defence of religious doctrines; either prescribed as fixed tents to which one should adhere, or used to justify actions that may be viewed negatively without a divine mandate. An example of this is the theological concept of *divine command theory*<sup>37</sup>, a proposition that today is upheld largely by some members of the monotheistic, Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) with notable variations emerging historically from Thomas Aquinas and Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD). This is a meta-ethical theory stipulating that any action can be considered morally *good* if it is commanded by God, who is regarded as 'perfect' and thus whose various edicts one should enact without question (Wierenga 1989). However, aside from the obvious implication that this sanctions many actions condemned within modern societies, its veracity also rests *entirely* on assuming the existence of God. Refuting the hypothesis of one or many deities is outside the scope of this study (see Dawkins 2006, Hitchens 2007); and as such, any argument for values as the consequences of a *divinity* can be disregarded within this work.

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<sup>35</sup> This is not to be confused with *rational egoism* – asserting that is more *rational* to act in one's self interest. Ethical egoism is the declaration of this position as morally correct.

<sup>36</sup> Famously, Alan Greenspan (chairman of the U.S. federal reserve from 1987-2006) was an early adopter of objectivist philosophy, espousing views that are often (and critically) seen to underpin his public policies.

<sup>37</sup> Plato opposed early allusions to this theory, as evidence by the *Euthyphro dilemma*, a theological provocation in which Socrates asks, "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" (In Allen 1970).

However, perhaps the objective approach to valuation that has achieved the widest influence (and arguably the one most closely related to Plato's conceptions) is Kant's theory, one born out of enlightenment rationalism. Central to Kantian ethics is the assertion that there exists one action (and one alone) that can be regarded as universally and objectively *good* and that forms the foundation of all morality; an act of *good will* (Kant 1993 [trans]). To Kant, such an act, unlike any other, remains good even if its intended results are unsuccessful. Moreover, good will is *the* underlying moral principle, one that emerges through a multitude of other virtues for the pursuit of moral ends. He argues that an act of good will is always in adherence to a moral law (or to a 'Categorical Imperative' as he describes it), an absolute, unconditional statement that must be obeyed in all circumstances and is justified as an end in itself. Kant's first formulation of such an imperative reads:

Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.

(Kant 1993 [trans], p.30)

Meaning that one should only act in accordance with the values that they would wish everyone else to share<sup>38</sup>. From this we can infer Kant's belief in rationality and reason, and the view that these qualities should be instrumental in determining our behaviors. Indeed, Kant believed that morality is the objective law of reason: just as objective physical laws necessitate physical actions (apples fall down because of gravity, for example), objective rational laws necessitate rational actions. He thus believed that a perfectly rational being must also be perfectly moral, because a perfectly rational being subjectively finds it necessary to do what is rationally necessary. Because humans are not perfectly rational (they partly act by instinct), Kant believed that humans must conform their subjective will alongside objective rational laws, such as those articulated by his Categorical Imperatives (Kant 1993 [trans]).

We can regard Kant's conception of *objective rational laws* as comparable to the higher strata of Plato's divided line. In both of these cases, forms of objective value are reached by making declarative

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<sup>38</sup> This first 'imperative' is often compared to 'the golden rule' famously espoused by Confucius - "Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself".

statements about things that are seen as fundamentally and uncontestably *good*, assertions that are founded upon rational argument. Once such a measure of *goodness* has been identified, then all actions that fulfill this measure can be regarded as morally correct. The more undisputed and essential these measures are, the more objectivity they attain, creating clearly defined distinctions between right and wrong. It is through such an exercise of reflection, required for the formation of these measures, that we can surpass subjective understanding and glimpse the timeless truisms that surmount Plato's hierarchy.

Variations of this mode of thought can be identified in all the above forms of objective value positions. They rely, to differing extents, upon being bound to one (or several) value judgments that are taken as self-evident facts. Values as such, are regarded as things that require a grounding within our experiences of the world and the reasoned subjective interpretation of our place within it. Aspects of the world and of human nature are taken as constants against which overarching conceptions of *goodness* are derived; universal allocations of worth that exist apart from history, culture or the individual. It is perhaps not difficult to imagine such a thing, or to infer its imprint from the picture of the world around us. Societies and cultures are founded upon (or at least evolve towards) widespread consensus in the fundamental priorities of individual people. We aspire to common sources of happiness, are unified in many of our aversions and exhibit shared emotive responses of guilt, loss, pleasure, pride, anger, resentment, apathy, loyalty, terror, joy and countless other reactions, to events in the world in which the understandings of individuals are broadly aligned. Even on purely aesthetic grounds, commonality of value judgment is rife; indeed (whilst taking into account an inevitable level of cultural conditioning identified in chapter one), the extent of glorification allocated to a Shakespeare, a Beethoven or a Michelangelo is surely inexplicable in its absence. Ultimately, it is largely accepted in science that we are born with an ingrained, rudimentary capacity to identify right from wrong (Hauser 2006); so much so that a deficiency in this ability is deemed the hallmark of psychopathy. Without such natural propensities, at any level of sophistication, no species would be able to prosper.

However, whilst a compelling case can be made for the notion of foundational and largely consistent value precepts, the process of defining these and describing their nature as *factual* with any evidential

authority is far more complex. Indeed many relativists would regard the idea of ‘factual values’ to be a contradiction in terms. Since an understanding of values is intrinsically subjective, how can this be utilised to form objective measures of worth? Moreover, the *absolutism* often associated with claims to moral authority is routinely criticised, rejecting an individual’s mandate for such assertions and highlighting the shifting and discrepant value systems that emerge throughout history and across cultures. Commonly, Kant’s argument, that a rational view of the world elicits moral behaviors, is contrasted with that of David Hume, originator of the ‘is/ought problem’ (Ayer 2002). To Hume, observations of factual phenomena (what ‘is’) can never be used to justify their valuation (what ‘ought to be’); that one can never move coherently from *descriptive* statements to *prescriptive* ones. In this view, Kantian ethics are questionable, as they are founded upon the examination of reality for the derivation of moral tenets. As a warning to his readers of such objective rationales, Hume writes:

But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention would subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason.

(Hume 1739, p.335)

Proponents of Hume’s philosophy, such as A. J. Ayer, have furthered this reasoning, arguing that ethical concepts themselves are meaningless, ‘mere pseudo-concepts’ that are unverifiable and thus devoid of any moral ‘truth’, as Ayer writes: ‘Thus if I say to someone, "You acted wrongly in stealing that money," I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, "You stole that money." In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it’ (Ayer 2002, p.107). In such a way, Ayer rejects the foundations upon which value judgments are asserted and views their perceived legitimacy as based solely upon people’s adherence to a misguided semantic convention. This view is similarly expressed by Nietzsche in ‘*On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*’ (1873) where moral truths are regarded as metaphors that lack any correspondence with reality: ‘truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what

they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins' (Nietzsche 1873).

Variations of purely subjective or relativistic explanations of values include: so called *non-cognitive* approaches, such as *expressivism* and *emotivism*, holding that statements of value denote nothing more than the attitudes or feelings of the individual (Ayer 2002, Stevenson 1937), the various strands of *relativism* (moral, cultural, aesthetic etc.) that dismiss any notion of universal validity and instead propose that truth is always relative to some particular frame of reference, such as a language or culture (Berlin 1997, Hare 1952), similarly, but with a crucial distinction, *subjectivism*, claiming that external values are illusory, one's own consciousness being the only unquestionable fact of existence (Brandt 1979) and the numerous incarnations of *moral skepticism* and *moral nihilism* (such as *error theory*) regarding all values as complex assemblages of rules and recommendations that (whilst sometimes providing advantages to their adherents) are without universal or even relative *truth* in any sense (Mackie 1977).

Considering these various assertions, many of which overlap and some even sharing *degrees* of compatibility with objectivist or realist ideas, a central divergence can be drawn between those that consider the *truth* of values to be dependent upon contextual circumstances (cultural, historical etc.) and those that reject the notion of factuality outright in any assessment of value judgment. Axiological truths then, are either taken to be *alterable*, a property one may argue is incompatible with the concept, or non-existent. Subjective value theories consistently offer convincing criticisms of evaluative statements, revealing flaws, assumptions and intrinsic bias, yet, they can often appear overly hypothetical, exercises in logic or semantics that fail to reflect reality. Commonly, such perspectives have faced criticism, as taken to literal extremes they can appear to sanction (or rather fail to logically condemn) statements, actions or beliefs that are regarded as self-evidently immoral. For instance, within a number of these theories, the statement 'murdering children is good' is no-less valid than to state the opposite; indeed, if a culture or individual were to genuinely believe this motion the subjectivist may be forced to concede that it is a statement of fact. Equally, attacks have been levied at some perceived forms of cultural relativism, whereby science can be regarded as having no more authority than any other system for describing elements of the world (religious traditions etc.), 'the

view that scientific truth is only one kind of truth and it is not to be especially privileged' (Dawkins 2006). In summation, whilst values emerge from within our subjective experience, the theories adopting a wholly subjective or relative foundation for value judgment appear difficult to reconcile with reality. Too often they seem to enable assertions that, whilst logically coherent, clash against lived experience and the legitimacy of values that we would regard as uncontested. Such statements call to mind G. E. Moore's Paradox, '*Moorean*' sentences being ones that are hypothetically valid yet seem ridiculous in actuality:

It's raining, but I don't believe that it is raining

(Baldwin 1993, pp.217-212)

Such a statement can be true, is logically consistent and non-contradictory, that is if we are to presume that truth is relative and an individual's *conceptions* cannot be justifiably disproved. Yet, whilst we recognise the error implicitly, the veracity of such a statement can be fairly argued in full light of its absurdity. Misapprehension and delusion are given the weighting of fact. Perhaps this is the great problem; that founded solely upon the relative subjectivity of individuals, there can be no distinction between *truth* and *belief*.

### **III. Acknowledging truths**

With particular regards to the opposition between objective and subjective measures, what reflections can be had upon the varying interpretations of value and its nature as described throughout the previous pages? And subsequently, how can this examination be used to guide the formation of a *definition* that will characterise 'value' within this work? To the first of these questions, I have come to a perspective as follows:

To declare specific values to be absolute or undisputable in their *goodness* appears contentious at the very least, and perhaps such exercises are inevitably self-defeating. Too easily are these criteria of worth undermined by exposure to the complexities of the world; the virtues of ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ are adulterated in the minds of the masochistic or the suicidal. Such prescriptive statements can never wholly fulfill the roles demanded of them; the role of truths. Further, one’s authority in making such claims is never total; indeed it *must never* be permitted to attain such perceived totality. Human history is scattered with the wreckage of such projects, where the subjective values of an individual, culture or belief system come to be regarded as infallible and beyond reproach. From the articles of religious faiths, to the wills of indomitable dictatorships and even in the proclamations of the uncontestedly beautiful, truth is *stolen* and redefined to fit the parameters of an inflexible doctrine. As societies, our values *evolve*, through error, experience and the accumulation of knowledge; we look back across the timeline of history and reflect upon the veracity of the judgments we once made. From this vantage point, in the contemplation of this *distance*, we gain the awareness of hindsight and the potentials of *foresight*, through accepting the limits of our own subjectivities and acknowledging the folly of those countless claimants who swore omniscience in determining right from wrong.

Yet, what picture are we greeted with from the opposing extreme? Where the ‘truth’ of a value is *solely* a product of one’s own subjective interpretation or fluid in its boundless tractability to the properties of any given context. In such circumstances, all ‘truths’ become equally true, a terminal contradiction whereby the very concept collapses in upon itself, its inherent meaning relinquished and nullified. From these perspectives, we may freely assert that ‘arbitrary murder is good’, a statement of opinion as valid as any other and irrefutable upon the grounds of ethics and logic. So too, can the titanic achievements of civilisation, in science, art or philosophy, be justifiably viewed as having no intrinsic or elevated worth; their value hinging upon the beliefs of individuals, many of whom may lack the competences and proclivity to recognise any significance or grandeur therein. Does beauty reside purely within the eyes of such beholders? Do the actions of an indiscriminate killer denote values that, whilst we may not share them, have equal validity to our own? Whilst logic may dictate this to be so, such sentiments seem incompatible with the world we observe around us; we feel a resistance to them, deterred by some abstracted criteria of valuation that can be neither defined nor denied. Just as we read

with consternation the implausible sentences of G. E. Moore, so the notion of value as an entirely subjective entity can elicit the sense that one is either in conflict with reality, or is in the process of being deceived.

All truths *are* equally true; there is no sliding scale, no margin for interpretation or variability relative to circumstance. That which is true is true, that which is not is not. Therefore, we must either accept that values can exist independently from, and irrespective of, individual and cultural viewpoints (in the objective sense), or that value is irreconcilable with the notion of truth, so that none may be held above others in factual terms. So, which of these propositions do we consider to be the more persuasive?

We live in a world of causality, indeed, ethics is founded upon this principle; all actions have consequences and we must continually strive for an understanding of these causal links and align our behaviours accordingly. Subjectively, one outcome is *always* superior to the others and through examining the bonds that tie our behaviours to their consequences we learn the most beneficial courses of action to take in pursuit of this perceived ideal. In doing so, we stratify a hierarchy of priorities, from that which we are *for* to that which we are *against*; in short, we formulate our values. Values are the *units* of all ethics, criterion that predetermine our actions and inform our perspectives; the valuable (*value-able*) are such entities that match this criteria - they are that which we seek to gain or otherwise retain. Yet, to what degree may we argue that such values are *true*, articles of objective worth that subsist beyond culture or the individual? Humanity shares so many common priorities, so many assumed standards of goodness and models of worth. We are a species that have flourished because of this, grown, advanced, endured, and as such, at the base of this ascent, perhaps we may perceive a universal axiom, one in fact common to all biology and that underlies its very existence; an indefinable quantity of *good* that qualifies the value of *life* itself.

May we state with certainty that life is of value, and that such an assertion is *true*? It must be considered, for this is all that is necessary to enable values to be acknowledged in objective terms. The existence of complex value judgements, defining notions of good and bad, is itself *dependent* upon life and the cognition of sentient creatures. Without such conscious life forms, requiring the ability to prioritise certain behaviours for their own survival, then the universe is indifferent. Yet, at the

emergence of life, suddenly causality takes hold, actions have consequences that affect an organism for better or for worse; right and wrong gain a meaning, in identifying that which is beneficial and that which leads to harm - the *is* becomes reliant upon an *ought*. Life makes value possible, and in doing so, values become the foundational preservers of life. The two are co-dependant, manifestations of a single entity, with one impossible in the absence of the other. A conscious being that feels no value for its own life could never survive, and a world without life is one devoid of values entirely. Can we then claim that life is of value, and that such a statement is *more* than one of opinion? I would consider it justifiable, for it is the thing that creates and necessitates valuation itself; our values are a reflection *of it*, priorities that enable the conscious being to perceive significance in the world around them and in their own subsistence. In such a way, the value of life is that upon which all other values depend; if *life* were of no worth, then nothing else could be either. Survival is contingent upon *will*, the valuing of life over death, from the unconscious processes of the first self-replicating molecules to our own instincts for preservation; such is a natural *law* to which all living things attest.

If we fail to obtain sources of nutrition we will die, if we fail to obtain water we will die faster, if we fail to breath oxygen we will be dead within minutes; our lives are dependant upon *things* in the world to which we attach degrees of priority. If we agree that life is a foundation of *good*; then, to varying extents, its necessary requirements are *good* by extension. Yet, it is only when such things become difficult to obtain that we recognise their worth, their *distance* from us revealing such concealed value. *We desire most that which we do not have*. If we break with accepted behavioural standards in our relationships with others our life may be affected, even endangered. If we reject societal laws we may become isolated, sentenced to live apart from the benefits of civilisation. If we do not pursue knowledge and understanding of the world our lives will be at risk, unable to forecast consequence and falling prey to any received idea or scam. If we do not perceive *worth* in our conceptions of the beautiful, then we reject that which is *life-affirming*, testaments to its value that elevate the significance of pleasure, expression and demonstrations of virtuosity. And so, values build upon each other, stacked higher and higher and fanning outwards in interconnected and impossibly complex *webs* of knowledge and priority that are structured by one's experiences of the world. Each of these is unique, as unique as each life, yet all share a common footing; in the *goodness* of life itself and the value of its retention.

We are all subjective, locked within our own consciousness; one can never fully know the mind of another individual. Our values spring from the unifying condition of *living* and its implicit worth, yet beyond that, proclamations of right and wrong can never be asserted by the subjective being. Life's value is beyond the subjective, it is the unifying *objective*, and as such we can never truly *know it* within the parameters of our selves. The value of life as manifest in the world is not something that can be pointed to with any authority, or expressed with any deed, yet it hangs above all such things. No statement can define it nor accepted moral tenet encapsulate its essence; those claiming to do so have no grounds upon which to assert *truth* in their declarations. Yet, it permeates and guides every opinion and every choice, it is the universal *arbiter* of these, one that we acknowledge by our very existence. Those that deny such a thing, claiming man to be 'the measure of all things', that 'truths' are subjective, undermine their own position with every breath they take. To deny life's universal value is to deny that life is possible, to claim that values *do not exist* and that any notion of truth therein can be cast aside without consequence. Yet we live in a world of causality, one in which we should refuse *both* those claimants that profess to absolute truth in their judgements, *and* those that would have the notion of truth be forgotten. *A truth that is stolen can be reclaimed; only one that is willingly surrendered has lost its meaning conclusively.*

For truth *must*, by definition, exist beyond the subjectivity of any one or any thing. We can never know it, yet we feel its effects, we witness its reflections in the world, and understand them implicitly. It is a fact of reality, cold, unyielding and indifferent, but *pristine*, a flawless thing of which we can have only limited conception. Yet it is this pristine nature of truth that renders it so fragile, so easily corrupted, disfigured or debased; those who would claim to offer it can give us only scraps at best, like fragments of an image cast outwards from the surface of a broken mirror. Still, such *shards* of reflected truths can hold such power and significance that we are willed to pursue them, they enable us to glimpse a thing greater than our own capacities will allow; the beauty of truth and its existence underlying our very definitions of *perfection*. Beauty is the recognition of a perfection sought, it is the ideal that we strive for yet know we can never reach; perfection marks the ungraspable standard against which all beauty is judged. Plato remarks upon the *perfect circle*, an entity that cannot physically exist (its points of intersection required to be infinite), yet we see its reflection cast upon the world, balance and symmetry harmonising towards this unattainable ideal. For if the perfect circle is non-factual, upon what criteria

are its physical manifestations based, what model do they seek to replicate? Truth *breathes* through all perceivable phenomena; the unfaltering causalities that shape the earth and trace the line of its path around the sun, that define the requirements of life itself and that pledge two and two will always add up to four. We can never comprehend it fully, yet the parameters of our values are defined by its pursuit.

#### **IV. On scarcity**

Let us now consider the intrinsic components of value and enable the formation a definition based upon these attributes. Across all of its definitions and descriptions, there is a consistent property that characterises value at its most basic; that is, its *oppositional* nature. Value denotes priority, preference and inequality, to value something highly it is required to stand apart from other things that we value less. Indeed, valuation is the imposition of disparity, stratifying the understood worth of things in order that we may perceive significance. The values that we each hold, moulded by our experiences, define the criteria upon which this hierarchy is structured; they predetermine our conceptions of phenomena and the degree of import we can identify within them (a process exemplified by the acquisition of knowledge and its revealed significance discussed in the first chapter). As such, to value something we must be *primed* and able to acknowledge specific attributes of worth within the phenomena we encounter. We see our own values reflected back at us from the objects we desire. A secondary component of our value judgements, though one pivotal for this work, is the common inverse-ratio that exists between the accessibility of certain phenomena and their perceived worth. *Scarcity value*, can be witnessed everywhere, from economics, commodities and raw materials to the level of perceived value that we instinctively place in objects of a rare or exotic nature. The monetary worth of an artwork reveals this explicitly, its price hinging substantially upon scarcity, authenticity and provenance. Furthermore, it must be considered the degree to which this scarcity value impacts upon our understandings, not merely of a thing's material worth, but of its aesthetic qualities that we take to be agreeable. If diamonds were as commonplace as coal, would they retain such lustre and intrinsic beauty? As the market's price for gold stocks crashed through the floor, would King Midas feel a weakening appreciation for the yellow metal he could instantly conjure? As Mark Twain remarks in '*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*' (2011): 'Tom said to himself that it was not such a hollow world,

after all. He had discovered a great law of human action, without knowing it – namely, that in order to make a man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain.’

Such is the eternal *pyramid* of our values; the wide base of necessities (food, water, air) upon which sedimentary layers are built, climbing and narrowing towards the distant, rarified pinnacle. It is only through this stratum that value can be known, regarding everything in opposition to its neighboring phenomena. The things below and the things above.

In summation, and taking into account the considerations of ‘value’ that have been discussed within this chapter, the definition of the term as used within this study is as follows:

...

**Value** is a perceived significance attributable to a defined phenomenon. To value something requires an acknowledged understanding of the thing *itself*, we cannot value that which we cannot perceive. It is a reflection of the **values** that we hold, standards or criteria against which we establish worth. For a thing to be **valuable** (value-able) it must conform in some regards to these criterion, we must be able to recognise (though we may not necessarily realise it) our own values reflected back at us from the thing.

Values are oppositional; they determine that which we are *for* and *against* with regards to the defined phenomena. They require the stratification of things by their perceived degrees of worth. Value as such, cannot exist amongst phenomena of uniform worth; it emerges from disparities within their perceived significances.

In such a way, our values determine our desires, establishing that which we seek to gain or retain. To desire something yet not possess it stipulates an obstacle, a distance imposed between *wanting* and *having*. The greater we value something, the greater distance we are willing to cross in order to attain it. Though this causality can also run in both directions. The greater the distance from us (through scarcity, inaccessibility, material worth, complexity of understanding etc.), then the more the thing is valued. Such *distances* are indispensable to the value of the phenomena that they separate from us.

...

**Value** then describes what we are *for*, **distance**, the yardstick that defines *the extent that we are for it*: a demonstration of the will to action in pursuit of our desires. The link between the two is telling of our conceptions of worth, our values both formed and exposed by the expanses that we will cross to see them fulfilled.

CHAPTER

III

THE AURA: DISTANCE &  
LONGING

## Introduction

Building directly upon the discussion of value outlined over the previous pages, this chapter will expand upon the notion of a 'journey' (raised earlier) and how the crossing of such distances can be seen as indicative within our attributions of worth. Core to this chapter will be a detailed investigation into Walter Benjamin's concept of the 'aura', specifying its stated properties, the implications of its loss (as a consequence of mechanical reproduction), and its applicability to our contemporary circumstances. Can the aura be meaningfully rethought today (following Benjamin's line of argument) and how many we define its imperative in light of the technological landscape of our present moment? Critically, to what extent may we regard Benjamin's forecasting of the aura's demise to be perceivable contemporarily and can we relate this persuasively to the cultural conditions facing the arts as outlined in the first chapter of this work? Ultimately, will we consider Benjamin's willingness to sacrifice the auric nature of the artwork to be a desirable prospect and can we make justified assertions as to what his perception of this may have been if he were writing today?

To begin with however, this chapter will more broadly explore the notion of the *crossing of distance* and the literary (or folkloric) legacy of such undertakings. This will be examined through Joseph Campbell's conception of the 'Hero's Journey', a consistently reoccurring motif that has emerged in a vast multitude of mythological narratives throughout historical time. Through what processes are such journeys thought to offer a transformative potential to those embarking upon them and what may we suggest accounts for the cross-cultural universality exemplified by this mode of storytelling?

The spiritual component of revealed significance thought to be offered by such journey's will subsequently be addressed and then contrasted with Benjamin's conception of the auric art object as one founded upon a ritualistic function. Benjamin's aesthetic theory will then be scrutinised, exploring its grounding in the conditions by which an object is experienced, the consequences of mechanical reproduction for such modes of experience and the work of later theorists (such as Paul Virilio) that take a similar line to Benjamin in their critique of the technologically mediated encounter. An important discussion will be had here on Benjamin's usage of the term 'distance', the varying interpretations of this and the meanings that we may take from it today; with the global reach of

wireless networks, is 'distance' from the object of experience an increasingly rare commodity? Moreover, may we regard such *distances* as the essential qualifiers of the aura through a contemporary reading of Benjamin's work?

Latterly, the on-going relevance of Benjamin's aura will be assessed in relation to our current circumstances and the cultural trends identified within this study. What are the identifiable implications of the aura's loss for the artwork, its cultural identity and the perceived authority of the artist? In summation, and against the tide of techno-cultural change, do the auric qualities of the art object hold such a level of significance that we should take steps to see them retained?

### **I. A return to the climb**

Consider again the imagery within the opening preface to this study (p.1) and the notion that the mountain summit's significance is the consequence of an obstacle (namely the mountain itself) that must be conquered in order to advance to its plateau. As proposed during the final paragraphs of the previous chapter, one's resolve to surmount such disincentives is expressive of their values and indicative of the degree to which they are held. What then may this evidence, regarding the foundational provenance of our values, how generalisable such identified sources may be, and how can we further define the nature of 'the summit' to unpack its unique and irreducible properties?

With the crossing of distance (in a broad, physical or non-physical sense) and the importance of this for our attributions of worth being central to this chapter, let us first explore the ways in which such undertakings have been characterised historically. Perhaps the most compelling trope dealing with such ventures, one arising within countless folkloric and mythological traditions, across cultures and time periods, is the consistently recurring 'Hero's Journey', being one of stark uniformity, suggestive perhaps of some archetypal impulse deeply ingrained within the human psyche. Within his work of comparative mythology *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell 2008), Joseph Campbell asserts this narrative commonality as a universal motif of adventure and transformation that runs through virtually all of the world's mythic traditions; one referred to by Campbell as the *monomyth*. For Campbell, such homogeneity in mankind's collective storytelling points towards a 'singleness of the

human spirit in its aspirations, powers, vicissitudes, and wisdom' (Campbell 2008, p.28), that renders such myths demonstrative of a universal yearning.

Prometheus ascended to the heavens, stole fire from the gods, and descended. Jason sailed through the Clashing Rocks into a sea of marvels, circumvented the dragon that guarded the Golden Fleece, and returned with the fleece and the power to wrest his rightful throne from a usurper. Aeneas went down into the underworld, crossed the dreadful river of the dead, threw a sop to the three-headed watchdog Cerberus, and conversed, at last, with the shade of his dead father. All things were unfolded to him: the destiny of souls, the destiny of Rome, which he was about to found, "and in what wise he might avoid to endure every burden". He returned through the ivory gate to his work in the world.

(Campbell 2008, pp. 23-24)

As the prevailing journey of the *monomyth* unfolds, we witness a familiar structure whereby the hero is separated from their everyday circumstances, becomes burdened by some form of undertaking (which produces a revelatory outcome), and then returns to the world transformed<sup>39</sup>. The recurrence of this format across myriad historical contexts (that such fables have held sufficient value as to be passed on through generations, recounted and re-formed for the times) suggests some vestigial inclination towards an intrinsic significance, one that supersedes cultural circumstance. Why is this, that as a species we should value tales of this kind so highly? Recalling the etymology of the word 'value' discussed within the last chapter (that which was tied to the notion of 'valour', a veritable synonym of heroism), what propositions can be made as to the relationship between these two concepts; that which we perceive as being of worth and the qualities or attributes of the hero?

Consider one's conceptions of value (as previously discussed) being both a product of (and necessitated by) life itself, and its natural requirements for survival. In some sense, the hero can be seen

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<sup>39</sup> Campbell's writing has had a profound impact upon popular culture, particularly through Hollywood cinema, with numerous screenwriters and directors (including Stanley Kubrick, George Lucas and Christopher Vogler) citing the structure of the *monomyth* as foundational to their work. The current trend for superhero films in Hollywood (which overwhelmingly follow a familiar pattern) is also testament to the *monomyth's* enduring appeal, Brown (2016) suggesting a link between their rise in popularity during the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and a sense of widespread social unease within the United States post 9/11 (such films often climaxing with the heroes confronting their antagonists within urban environments and attempting to prevent city-wide carnage).

to jeopardise this fundamental base of values, choosing to risk their life in pursuit of overcoming the obstacle that is pivotal in their journey. However, what this serves to demonstrate is a hierarchy of values on the hero's behalf, that the transformative potential of prevailing in their endeavours is worth such liability to their own survival (reaching for the upper level of the divided line). To apprehend meaning and purpose in one's life, to an extent that these can come to exceed the priority of one's own subsistence is perhaps a central longing of the human condition. Our religious doctrines, political ideologies, myths, legends and various private infatuations attest to this, for better or for worse, it can appear as though we crave devotion to some meaningful ideal; railing against our own capabilities to pursue the numinous, in emulation of those heroic figures to whom we aspire.

For it is these capabilities, the parameters of human capacity, that define the obstacles to which we oppose ourselves and that explicate the ubiquity of the 'Hero's Journey'. Reflect, for instance, upon the modern marathon (a foot race of 26.2 miles), its origins and the principles expounded by its challenge to the human body. The first organised race of this kind was held at the 1896 Olympic games in Athens, as an event inspired by the legend of an ancient Greek messenger who had raced from the site of Marathon to Athens, a distance of nearly 25 miles<sup>40</sup>, bearing news of a significant Greek victory over an invading army of Persians in 490 B.C. After making his announcement, the exhausted messenger is said to have collapsed and fallen to his death, overcome by the strain of the task. The marathon's distance is both qualified and constrained by the uppermost limits of our potentials, not 26 meters, not 260 miles, but the maximum ground a human being was thought to be capable of covering at pace under their own power. A distance (and physical undertaking) of a magnitude that would be sufficient to pose a threat to life.

Conceivably, human endeavour may be considered the barometer against which we instinctively gauge and commit our attributions of worth; for both ourselves and through its observation in the actions of others. The mountain climb affords significance to the summit through the onerousness of the task it imposes upon the *human being*, the stresses enforced by each step of its ascent sharply contextualising one's body in relation (spatially and temporally) to the distant apex; our physical forms (their strengths and frailties) are the frames of reference through which we, by nature, perceive (and rationalise) the

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<sup>40</sup> The distance of the race was latterly extended to the now formalised 26.2 miles during the 1908 London Olympics, as this additional distance permitted a more favorable viewing experience for the British royal family.

wider world. By consequence, distance is a quantity that we simultaneously yearn for and voraciously crave to annihilate. The far off horizon is an objective then engenders purpose in one's existence, willing us forward, it is the gravitational pull of an ambition, an aura that wreaths the terminus of the 'Hero's Journey'.

Yet, in our desire to conquer all distances (implicitly knowing such undertakings to induce value in our experience of the world), the imperative connection between the journey and the physicality of the human being can become side-lined, or eradicated in its entirety. Such dislocation is a product of technology, through devices that extend our capabilities beyond the capacity for physical comprehension. The summit is immediately at-hand, untethered from its spatio-temporal confines that contextualise its significance in relation to the human being and their prolonged endeavours. Thus, the once heroic act is deprived of its worth, an objective is granted in the absence of the journey that once conferred value upon it. The powers endowed upon us by technological advancement absolve us of the frailties that could once be fought against in the transformative assignment of purpose and self-worth, in its presence, we become godlike by comparison to our former selves; infinitely capable of attaining a goal, but at the price of sacrificing the meaning such objectives once held. A modern aircraft can cover the distance of a marathon in less than 11 seconds; we exceed the capacities of our ancestors to a degree that alienates us from them, whilst sharing a common nature and innate conception of worth, one eclipsed by the arrival of such *deus ex machina*.

The pantheon of Greek deities were said to reside at the summit of Mount Olympus, on the highest pinnacle of the *Mytikas* peak. To the authors of this mythology, such a rarefied place would be looked upon as unconquerable, beyond the capacities of mortal men. Its essence, its unique and symbolic prestige, is defined by this elusive quality, the summit valueless, without the mountain standing beneath it.

## II. The aura

The tone of *religiosity* ascribed to the notion of ‘the summit’ as articulated up to this point is not without intention, indeed, on returning to the cultural identity of the artwork, such veneration is important to consider, how essential this is to our understanding of the object, and the implications of its loss in the face of societal change. For it was the conviction of Walter Benjamin that technology would enable contemporary societies to emancipate the work of art from the (perceived) burden of such sacred (and intrinsically hierarchical) agency. The reproducibility of an object (and its subsequent experience) by technologies was thought by Benjamin to divorce the work of art from an attribute that commanded such cult-like reverence; an essence he would come to define as *aura*<sup>41</sup>.

Writing within his radical essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (2008), Benjamin articulates his case thus:

The oldest works of art, as we know, came into being in the service of some ritual – magical at first, then religious. Now it is crucially important that this auric mode of being of the work of art never becomes completely separated from its ritual function. To put it another way: The ‘one-of-a-kind’ value of the ‘genuine’ work of art has its underpinnings in the ritual in which it had its original, initial utility value. [...] What happened was: when, with the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, namely photography (simultaneously with the dawn of Socialism), art felt a crisis approaching that after a further century became unmistakable, it reacted with the theory of ‘L’art pour l’art’ [‘art for art’s sake’], which constitutes a theology of art.

(Benjamin 2008, pp. 10-11)

For Benjamin, the reproducibility of the art object (with the erosion of the understood authority of the ‘genuine’) would replace its ritualistic function within culture with an alternate underpinning: that of politics (p.12). The object would become freed from the anchors of traditional concepts such as

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<sup>41</sup> Benjamin’s first usage of the term ‘aura’ appears in his 1931 essay *A Short History of Photography* (Benjamin 1931) while “trying to account for the exceptional quality of portrait photography prior to its industrialisation” (Costello 2005).

‘creativity’, ‘genius’ and ‘everlasting value’ (p.2); conceivably conservative notions that Benjamin asserted could be pressed into the service of *Fascism*. Benjamin’s judgements are clearly influenced by his engagement with *Marxism*, dialectical thinking and the materialist conception of history being the foundations upon which his wider philosophies are constructed. As such, *The Work of Art [...] opens by establishing the necessity to consider a new concept of art (based around contemporary trends in mechanical production) that would manifest following the overthrow of Capitalism. Here we see the egalitarian (even utopian) promise so often attributed to emergent technologies, with Benjamin asserting that changes in cultural production would, over time, transform the values of society, bringing them inline with his conception of art’s new rationale. To once again evoke McLuhan, We become what we behold. We shape our tools and then our tools shape us. As Benjamin describes:*

The manner in which human sense perception is organised, the medium in which it occurs, is dictated not only naturally but also historically. [...] And if changes in the medium of perception occurring in our own day may be understood as a fading of aura, the social conditions of that fading can be demonstrated.

(Benjamin 2008, pp. 8-9)

Subsequently, Benjamin goes on to narrate how insatiably the societies of his day would seek to become “closer to things” (p.9), describing this as “every bit as passionate a concern of today’s masses as their tendency to surmount the uniqueness of each circumstance by seeing it in reproduction” (p.9). This present zeitgeist (and its inferred trajectory) is consequently viewed by Benjamin as evidence that the qualities he ascribes to the aura are in terminal decline. As with the examples of Orwell and Huxley outlined earlier, within the early twentieth century one can witness continual ruminations on the possible outcomes of a volatile technological landscape in the process of escalating capacities; visions that can be either optimistic or more wary, but that in all cases expound in some way the values of their author. With the gathering momentum behind the Nazi war machine in 1935, Wolin (1982) remarks upon the social conditions of Benjamin’s *The Work of Art [...] essay*. Shown trembling on the edge of a cultural precipice, the rationale of Benjamin’s aesthetic theory (with its contingency for the aura’s extirpation) may be brought into a sharper focus.

whether or not autonomous art could be salvaged seemed to Benjamin an entirely otiose, scholastic question. All prevalent tendencies pointed, in his view, to such art's imminent demise and the incorporation of its dying vestiges into the fascist program of self-glorification. In face of the threat to civilization posed by fascism, bourgeois talk about the preservation of culture seemed reprehensibly self-indulgent. As far as culture was concerned, the only practice that seemed to make sense at the time was to render art serviceable for progressive political ends, for ends that were staunchly opposed to those of fascism: the ends of communism.

(Wolin 1982, p.185)

Evidentially perhaps of technology's philosophical instrumentalisation, Benjamin's dismissal of the perceived archaic or ritualistic character of the art object (or more accurately the character of its cultural identity) and the potentials of technology to come to the service of this has been similarly expressed by groups and individuals on the opposing side of the political spectrum. In its advocacy of modernisation and celebrations of speed, machinery, industry and violence, Filippo Marinetti's *Manifesto del Futurismo* [Futurist Manifesto] (2001) is an unyielding call to arms in pursuit of technologically enabled cultural rejuvenation. Despite its thinly-veiled intimations of Italian nationalism, explicit veneration of war (glorifying it for its 'hygienic' properties) and the Futurist group's unapologetic collusions with Fascism and the Italian far-right, the manifesto yet shares a common stance to Benjamin's in its will to cut art loose from its historical moorings and engage in a nascent form of institutional critique.

Museums, cemeteries! [...] To make a visit once a year, as one goes to see the graves of our dead once a year [...] We can even imagine placing flowers once a year at the feet of the Gioconda<sup>42</sup>!

(Marinetti 2001, p.148)

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<sup>42</sup> 'La Gioconda' (or 'Lisa del Giocondo') is a reference to Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*; further enforcing Marinetti's contempt for the perceived primacy of iconic cultural artefacts.

Technology then, is seen as a tool, not just for the specific task stipulated by its manufacture, but as a cultural influence, one with the power to further a socio-political ideal. Political allegiances notwithstanding, Benjamin and Marinetti both sought to *dethrone* the work of art, instrumentalising a shift in cultural conditions to undermine the values that once legitimised its authority. The feasibility of such projects is important to consider (can such a shifting or its effects be witnessed in our present cultural circumstances?) and this will be examined further as we look at the fundamental aspects of Benjamin's aesthetic theory and its essentially experiential nature.

Benjamin's conception of aesthetics is founded entirely upon the conditions of object's encounter, taking a phenomenological line of thinking with an essential axiom of his theory being that over historical time *experience itself* has become increasingly devalued. As he writes in an early essay entitled *On the Program of the Coming Philosophy* (2002), "Experience is the uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge" (p.108), Anderson (2015) commenting that:

In other words, he identifies uniformity, continuity and multiplicity as signs of experience, signs that stand in contrast to that which characterizes 'the age of reproduction', that is, the fractured, the ruptured, the similar.

(Anderson 2015, p.34)

Considering Benjamin's definition, its acknowledgement of a 'continuous multiplicity' of knowledge and the dangers imposed upon this by the 'fractured' essence of experience engendered by mechanical reproduction, we may reflect upon the concept of *Accumulative Value* introduced within the first chapter of this study. With an object's value (as proposed) being contingent upon an awareness of its accumulated histories and interpretations (across historical time), it may be suggested that a discontinuity in its timeline (produced by reproduction) erodes its perceived worth and the value ascribed to its direct encounter.

Being bound to the experience of (physical) human beings, Benjamin's aesthetics is also deeply concerned with the *materiality* of encounters, examining the material impact of the experiential space

in which our encounters are manifest. Considering the discussion earlier in this chapter of the ways in which our attributions of worth can be seen as tied to (and reflect) the capacities of the human body, Benjamin's assertions that our encounters play-out through the prism of our physical forms are also interesting to explore. As articulated in *Experience and Poverty* (1933):

One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness. Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low, that our picture, not only of the external world but of the moral world as well, overnight has undergone changes that were never thought possible. With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war the men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? [...] A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.

(Benjamin 1933, pp.143-144)

As such, the pace and severity of technological change is seen by Benjamin to divorce the human being from an ability to comprehend the world in relation to their physical capacities, limiting the potential for 'genuine' experience and abolishing the significance such encounters once held. Like a psychological hall of mirrors, we witness our innate characteristics becoming contorted in unnatural, ungraspable directions; feeling bewilderment at this distorted reality and a lingering sense that one's confrontations are in some ways illusory.

Several years ago, during an email exchange with Jean-Pierre Hébert (a pioneering figure in digital art with computer-based works stretching back to the mid-1970's), I questioned the artist on the ongoing relevance (as he saw it) of the physical object in an age of digital replication. His response was that:

[...] it will become more and more essential in our lives as it will tend to disappear. the art object is more gratifying to our senses, as long as we remain humans as we know it.

Hébert's response here is suggestive of a perpetual longing for the tangible encounter with the object, its physicality and material presence demanded by their comprehension in relation to our own. Furthermore, one may infer from Hébert's language that if such conditions were brought to a halt, we may no longer be even considered 'human' in the manner of today; such is the imperative of sensory material experience for our very self-identification. Yet, for Benjamin, circumstances could be foreseen in which such values would be circumvented; in which the aura would not only reach a point of *disappearance*, but gradually relinquish its inherent lustre. Within Benjamin's writing, the demise of the aura is articulated as the justified (and inevitable) consequence of the author's political ideals reaching fruition, though it must be stated that its sacrifice is written of with a discernable degree of pathos. It is telling perhaps, that even a writer positioning himself in advocacy of its destruction seems incapable of fully renouncing the aura's unalienable romance. Weight, conceivably, to the argument that the aura's essential peculiarities are one's to which we are naturally predisposed. By way of an illustration to his concept, Benjamin draws comparisons between the aura of the historical object, and the object that is naturally occurring, proposing that:

We define the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch.

(Benjamin 1992, p.300)

Notice here that Benjamin is defining the aura as a unique phenomenon (or experiential occurrence) of 'a distance'. It is a concept that describes an expanse, a separation between subject and object. Differing interpretations have been proposed in order to clarify Benjamin's use of the term 'distance' in this context (that pertaining to the experience of natural phenomena, the mountain, the branch etc.),

Watts (2012) arguing that Benjamin's 'concept of the aura has got absolutely nothing to do with physical distance' (Watts 2012, p.2), and that its usage in relation to the encounter of natural phenomena is purely allegorical. Instead, Watts asserts that Benjamin's aura is founded solely on the *authenticity* of an object, that authenticity which eludes technological reproduction. Watts cites Benjamin's statements from several paragraphs prior to the mountain allegory, in which he states that as a result of mechanical reproduction:

a supremely sensitive core in the art object is affected that no natural object possesses in the same degree of vulnerability. This is its genuineness [authenticity]. The genuineness of a thing is the quintessence of everything about it since its creation that can be handed down, from its material duration to the historical witness that it bears.

(Benjamin 2008, p.7)

By Watts' reading, this core of authenticity is one unique to the historically constructed work of art and philosophically inapplicable to the natural object. Unimbued by the accumulated relics of historical significance, Watts regards the natural object as devoid of this 'auric' quality, rendering their poetic usage by Benjamin, and consequently the geo-spatial allusions in Benjamin's usage of 'distance', as evidential of a creative license, one, Watts argues, that has been regularly misinterpreted.

The aura of a natural object, therefore, is defined in terms of the apparition of a distance, what Benjamin elsewhere calls the semblance of distance. And in respect of the natural object (and which also applies to the historical object), it does not matter whether the object is actually physically distant like a mountain range or whether it is close by like the branch of a tree (close enough to cast a shadow on the subject)—physical distance is not the issue. Distance is a metaphor for separation, and the screen that separates the object from the subject is its authenticity.

(Watts 2012, pp. 3-4)

Others however counteract this viewpoint, such as Richard Wolin (1982), emphasising a non-symbolic interpretation of Benjamin's 'distance' and contending that it may be applicable (and useful) within the discussion of actual, spatio-temporal expanses and the ways in which these are reconfigured by

technological change. Describing the aura's condition as one expressing a 'uniqueness, a singularity in time and space which is the hallmark of its authenticity' (Wolin 1982, pp.187-188), Wolin firmly asserts an object's spatio-temporal *moorings* as the foundations upon which its *genuineness* is to be assured. Similarly, during a discussion of telepresence<sup>43</sup> in his book *The Language of New Media* (Manovitch 2001), Lev Manovitch juxtaposes the arguments of Benjamin (from *The Work of Art [..]*) with those outlined by Paul Virilio in *Big Optics* (1992), illustrating a thematic commonality in a shared conception of spatial transformation. Despite being written half a century (of rapid technological progression) apart, it is established that both essays are aimed to confront the disruption caused by a new cultural artefact (film for Benjamin, telecommunication for Virilio) and its interventions into human nature. In the case of both writers, this *nature* is equated with spatial distance between the observer and the observed (Manovitch 2001, p.171) with technologies construed as the destroyers of this *distance*. In considering Virilio's adoption of the term, Manovitch notes:

In Virilio's reading, these technologies collapse physical distances, uprooting familiar patterns of perception that ground our culture and politics. Virilio introduces the terms "Small Optics" and "Big Optics" to underline the dramatic nature of this change. Small Optics are based on geometric perception shared by human vision, painting and film. It involves distinctions between near and far, between an object and a horizon against which the object stands out. Big Optics is real-time electronic transmission on information, "the active optics of time passing at the speed of light".

As Small Optics are replaced by Big Optics, the distinctions characteristic of Small Optics are erased. If information from any point can be transmitted with the same speed, the concepts of near and far, horizon, distance and space itself no longer have any meaning. So, if for Benjamin the industrial age displaced every object from its original setting, for Virilio the post-industrial age eliminates the dimension of space altogether. At least in principle, every point on earth is now instantly accessible from any other point on earth

(Manovitch 2001, p.172)

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<sup>43</sup> The use of virtual reality technology, especially for remote control of machinery or for the apparent participation in distant events.

In consideration of these conflicting perspectives, regarding Benjamin's aura and the legitimacy of physical (spatio-temporal) readings of his use of 'distance', one may argue that this dispute has become an irrelevance in our contemporary circumstances. Whilst Benjamin's intentions may have been to situate his concept with relation to 'authenticity' or 'one-of-a-kindness', lyrically expressing the erosion of these traits by mechanical reproduction, today, the work of art in the age of digital replication can be characterised by its boundless accessibility, wireless networks yielding a plausible omnipresence; the object is everywhere, all at once, always. As Virilio suggests, space and place can come to be thought of as facing annihilation, themselves historical artefacts and subsumed by the light speed synchronicity of the digital age. In such a way, physical distance between the object, its spectator and a fixed spatial horizon must surely be considered today to be a central component of the aura as Benjamin describes it. His aesthetic theory, bound as it is to factors of experience, can be seen as elastic enough to accommodate this altered stage upon which our encounters are increasingly played out.

If this is to be granted, what then of the aura? How may this concept be reevaluated for our present times and utilised to confront the questions posed by this study? As has always been the case, the aura is an expression of values, demonstrative of a criterion of worth, in confirmation of which we uphold the authentic above its technologically enabled simulacra. Today however, the aura can be thought of as dually reliant upon both this perceived authority of provenance (that which is eluded by mechanical reproduction), the 'quintessence of everything about it since its creation that can be handed down, from its material duration to the historical witness that it bears' (Benjamin 2008, p.7), and also the spatial expanses we are prepared to cross to orient ourselves in its physical presence; those imperilled by digitally facilitated telepresence. These two distances define the aura's present nature, the temporal (the object's unique timeline stretching back from its creation to the present moment), and the spatial (its exclusive location in a defined physical space), its on-going significance hinges upon the value we place in the negotiation of these.

Even with the most perfect reproduction, one thing stands out: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in the place where it is at this moment

(Benjamin 2008, p.5)

It is interesting to consider that a possible misreading of Benjamin (numerous commentators perhaps wrongly attributing his use of the word ‘distance’ to the consideration of physical space) may have sustained his works continued resonance; feasibly one may argue that this has rendered his writing as more pertinent to our *current* historical context than to Benjamin’s own era. Indeed, within this chapter I have utilised two separate translations of *The Work of Art [...]*, one in which ‘distance’ is consistently replaced by ‘remoteness’, perhaps in an attempt to avoid any inference of spatial connotations on behalf of the reader. Could this be telling of Benjamin’s prescience? Perhaps it is indicative of technological progression tracking along a consistent line of developmental change, shrinking, and subsequently closing, the gaps between ourselves and that which we seek to be near. In any case, within the changed circumstances of our present time, we may argue that *distance* has become a quantity of progressive *scarcity*, for the work of art and its cultural identity, it is perhaps imperative that its understood value should magnify accordingly.

With this in mind, perhaps we may propose the following: that Benjamin’s poetic articulation of the aura as ‘the unique phenomenon of a distance’ has come to a point of fruition, now justifying a literal interpretation against the backdrop of our present conditions, that *distance* may no longer be thought of in terms of a figurative trait assigned to the notion of *aura*, but that these two concepts have been rendered interchangeable, cultural circumstances (and their experiential implications) dissolving the distinctions that one demarcated their individuality, that the aura **is** distance, the essence that defines the spatio-temporal existence of a distinct entity against an immovable horizon. That distance is the arbiter of an object’s ‘uniqueness’, its ‘genuineness’, its ‘authority’, its ‘continuity’ and the ‘historical witness that it bears’, the contextualising force that attunes the material order to which the human being is intrinsically acclimatised, the initiator of ritual and rite, the heroic, the transformative and the qualifier of the precious, the sacred and the remote; it is the mountain that beckons in pursuit of the summit.

Technology’s trajectory, by our own design, manoeuvres toward an ultimate overthrow of *remoteness* as an unalterable circumstance of our lived experience, yet, whilst confronting this brave *new* world, our vestigial impulses, and the values they elicit, remain grounded firmly in the old. For as long as we ‘remain human as we know it’, we will desire most that which we do not have, today, such a longing is avowed by the value of distance.

### III. The hero in the distance

Socio-politically, today's world bears little in resemblance to the circumstances within which Benjamin welcomed the death of the aura<sup>44</sup>. No longer do we see a European continent shrouded in the flags of Fascism, nor a globally unified workers movement jostling to usher in a Marxist utopia, even theoretically, no model for a Socialist economy presents itself as sufficiently viable to pose challenge to the free market (however defined). We may ask ourselves whether, within the cultural conditions of today, Benjamin would yet wish to observe his aura's decline, or was the urgency with which he took to this project merely a response to situational factors, ideological imperatives now abandoned in a bygone era? Of course, following his death (in September of 1940) it is impossible to make claims to any commitment on behalf of Benjamin with any level of assurance, though perhaps we may look to his body of work and advance some defensible hypotheses.

Recall the language and imagery employed by Benjamin to cement a sense of the aura in the mind of his reader; "while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch" (Benjamin 1992, p.300). The tactile sensuousness of this symbolism is remarked upon by Costello in *Re-Reading Benjamin Today* (2005), describing a portrayal that is:

[...] nothing if not a traditional, even Romantic, one of the aesthetic appreciation of nature. And given that this kind of experience is what Benjamin will go on, famously, to proclaim is 'withering' in a mass society, the Romantic provenance seems highly appropriate; for what could be more alien to modern urban existence than the leisure to pause on a summer afternoon to immerse oneself in a distant vista?

(Costello 2005, p.10)

The connotations implicit in a 'withering' of such encounters, those imbued by Benjamin with a degree of romantic nostalgia, perhaps suggest a level of mourning on Benjamin's behalf. With urbanised populations increasingly divorced from such encounters, Benjamin's words can appear somewhat

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<sup>44</sup> Evoking Roland Barthes' essay 'The Death of the Author' (Barthes 1967) is intentional here, one may draw parallels between the severing of an object's historical timeline (through reproduction, in Benjamin's writing) and Barthes' distancing of authorship from our comprehensions of the object being considered.

melancholic, gloomily confronting the conditions of the modern age with a sense of grim inevitability.

As Costello goes on to narrate:

The process of mutual adaptation between the new urban masses and the texture of life in the modern city that the dominance of this form of perception engenders is the context for Benjamin's discussion of 'aura' in the later essay [The Work of Art...]. What is significant about the masses in this regard is the way in which their forms of interaction with the city foreclose earlier – more auratic – modalities of experience. That is, modes of experience that prized particularity and difference over sameness, and distance over closeness. Modern cities as experienced by the masses are hostile to such experience, both spatially and temporally. On the temporal axis, the typical experiences of life in the industrial city – being jostled by the crowd, traversing busy streets, repetitive work on automated production lines, clock-time – amount, for Benjamin, to a series of miniature shocks that fracture temporal duration into a series of discrete moments lacking narrative coherence.

(Costello 2005, p.12)

Thus, for Costello, Benjamin simultaneously welcomes *and* mourns the aura's passing, being not so much a steadfast, unequivocal conviction, but a necessary surrender in correlation with the times. Rabat (2016) adopts a similar stance and alludes to Benjamin's positive appraisal of the aura in *A Short History of Photography* (1931) during his discussion of the works of Hill and Nadar; 'lovingly detailed readings of those ancient portraits testify that their aura evinces no negative connotation whatsoever' (Rabat 2016, p.5). In light of this, we may propose that Benjamin's dismissal of the aura is (to some significant degree) a reaction to circumstance, perhaps fittingly for an aesthetic theory so grounded by the parameters of lived experience. What then may be contended regarding the imperative (as Benjamin would see it) for the aura's obsolescence today?

I would argue that this is no longer a just cause, quite the opposite, that the aura's retention and a cultural emphasis on the value of distance are now pressingly consequential. Within Benjamin's time of civilizational crisis, one may empathise with his willingness to apprehend the aura's exclusive nature as expendable, or even that the discussion of preserving the cultural artefact's intrinsic character

would be a self-indulgent, wanton exercise; irresponsible in acknowledgment of the dire circumstances and evidential of a deficit in social conscience. Yet, Benjamin's commitment to the work of art (and its auric nature) can be regarded as such that he would sooner have seen its destruction than the 'incorporation of its dying vestiges into the fascist program of self-glorification' (Wolin 1982, p.185). Benjamin's devoted political allegiances were such that it would be insincere to attribute his compliance in the aura's dissolution to purely such cultural *conservationism*, but in a period (such as our own) in which the Marxist ideologue is of drastically reduced cultural influence, the argument may be put forth that it would be far less likely for Benjamin to embrace the aura's downfall with equivalent conviction.

Viewed within his period of tensions and violence, the aura (and its retention) was perhaps too bourgeois a preoccupation, maybe even a notion too *innocent*, too pristine and easily corrupted, an ideal unsuited for an age of brutality and the savage clashing of political forces. It is one perhaps demonstrative of the civility (or stability) of our times, laying dormant in moments of crisis, only to revive anew as the waters settle.

Subsequently, whilst we may theorise Benjamin's *desire* for the aura's destruction to be (in part) a condition of foregone environmental factors, the mechanisms by which he perceived such destruction (and the implications for the art object's cultural primacy) are supportably of striking concurrence with our present moment.

However, the instant the criterion of genuineness in art production failed, the entire social function of art underwent an upheaval. Rather than being underpinned by ritual, it came to be underpinned by a different practice: politics.

(Benjamin 2008, p.12)

Reflect back upon the public justifications contemporarily made for the arts (by numerous organisations and individuals) as outlined in the first chapter of this study. In its entirety, the examined conflict between intrinsic and instrumental assessments of art's perceived significance can be distilled to *that which is of its own inherent worth* versus *that which serves the fulfilment of a political aim*.

Considering Benjamin's assertions, that mechanical reproduction leads inexorably to an erosion in the authority of the auric art object (and by extension the authority of its advocates), recall the tide of change from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, with figures such as William Hayley commanding significant cultural influence, to today, where the public expression of hierarchies in aesthetic worth, and the promotion of 'high art's' superiority reap self-righteous cries of elitism from an indulged, offence-seeking quota of the populace. Contemplate the relativist claims towards art's fundamentally subjective value and the public museums and galleries cynically professing the parity of all interpretive meaning, however baseless, in a bid for perceived inclusivity. More broadly, note the surge of populism, the (intermittently warranted but injudiciously exercised) mistrust of institutions and the conspiratorial, pseudo-intellectualism of so-called 'Fake News' vitiating public discourse within the undiscerning echo-chamber of social media. Confront the emboldened dismissal of the experienced, the specialised, the knowledgeable, the competent and the skilled, their capabilities mere relics of a time when the boundary between truth and opinion could be more dutifully guarded; ones *feelings* are weighted over facts, the 'so-called expert', now a mark of derision. Conceding this, we may be justified in claiming Benjamin to have foreseen the work of art's present vulnerabilities, its eminence dulled by the fading light of its aura, in consideration of the above, one wonders whether *reality* itself now bears signs of a similar fate.

As the foundational question undying this study, the ways (and degrees to which) our changing technological landscape has influenced the present conditions facing the art object will be explored further within the conclusion of this work.

The heroic stature of the Renaissance artist (who's work in the profane service of beauty was so bemoaned by Benjamin) does appear somehow incompatible with a world bereft of an auric compulsion in the minds of those willed to uphold it. Particularly within our increasingly secularised societies in which the (conspicuous) *ritual function* of religious and mythological imagery has passed from common practice. Indeed, technological reproduction severs an artwork's ties to the artist's hand, authenticity being contingent upon a defined *authorship*. The loss of aura demotes, not merely the work of art, but the artist, the great master, the heroic figure within whose creations we witness the world (and by extension, ourselves) as transformed. The reverence with which the preeminent figures

of High Modernist art (or indeed, of the High Italian Renaissance) were regarded is interesting to account for and its vulnerability to decline (in line with that of the aura) important to reflect upon.

As the first Western artist to have biographical texts published within his own lifetime (one of which being composed by Giorgio Vasari, c.1550, and found within his collected biographical work *The Lives of the Artists*) Michelangelo Buonarroti can perhaps be considered an archetype upon which the notion of the artist as a numinous figure of ethereal significance can be seen to have developed. Indeed, within his own lifetime, the artist was often referred to (by Vasari and others) as *Il Divino* [The Divine One]<sup>45</sup>, as though his abilities were beyond the capacities of the human being, his hand guided by some celestial will. As Vasari adulates in his introduction to the artist's biography:

[...] the most benevolent Ruler of Heaven mercifully turned His eyes towards earth, and, witnessing the hopeless quantity of such labours, the most fervent but fruitless studies, and the presumptuous opinion of men who were further from the truth than shadows from the light, He decided, in order to rid us of so many errors, to send to earth a spirit who, working alone, was able to demonstrate in every art and every profession the meaning of perfection.

(Vasari 1991 [trans], p.414)

The transformation of 'the artist' (in merely decades) from a skilled tradesman to a being of sublime power, possessing a revelatory potential for mankind is surely telling of a changed cultural condition, the *Renaissance Humanism* prevailing in the period seeking to revive (and further) the legacy of culture, literature and moral philosophy manifest in classical antiquity. We see a culture in transition, midway between a medieval Christian *supernaturalism* and modern scientific rationality. As the dominance of religious orthodoxy becomes increasingly maligned, its once infallible devotions are rechanneled toward the (heroic) human being; our advancing potentials for discovery and creation now reshaping the world in *our* own image.

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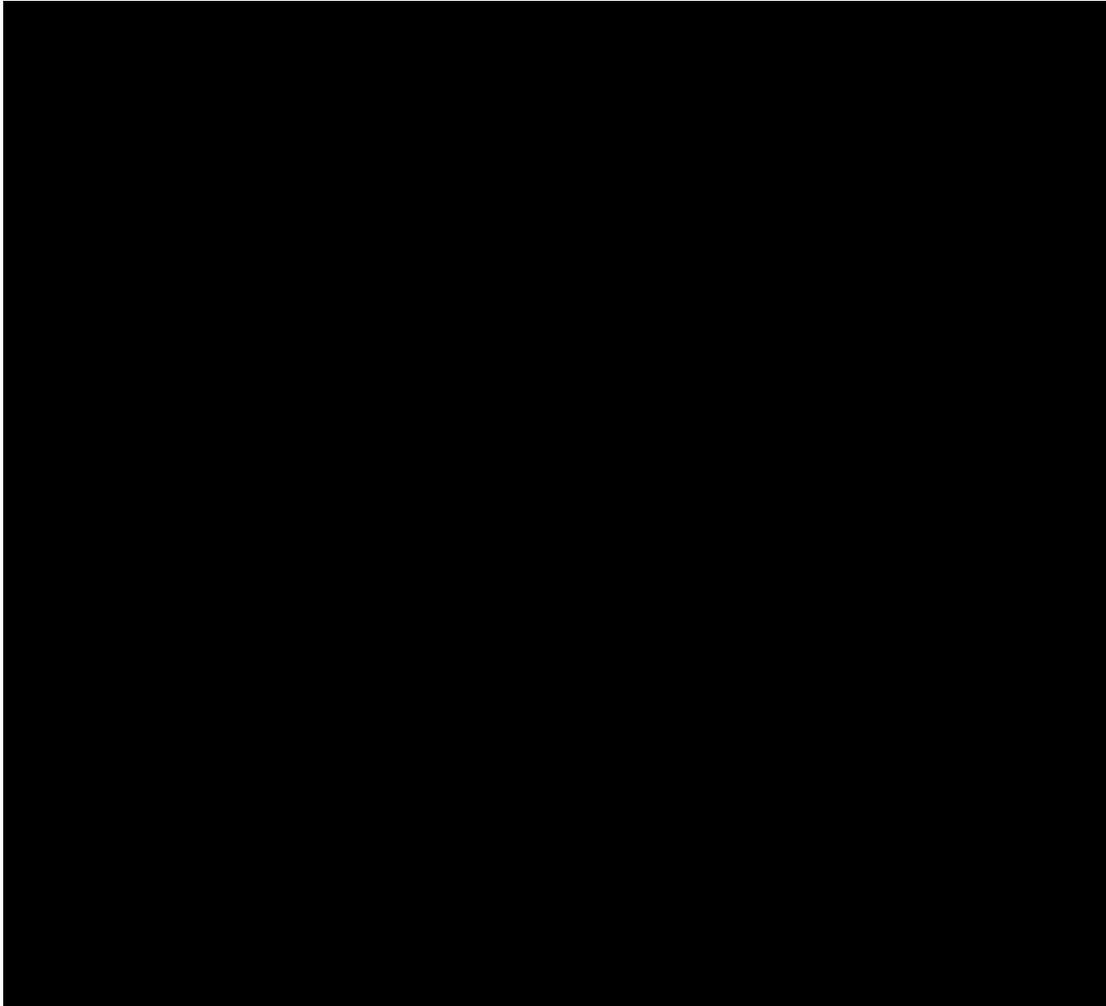
<sup>45</sup> This was reportedly an epithet despised by Michelangelo, stating that if the masses were aware of how tirelessly he worked then they would detract their assertions of any supernatural collaboration.

It is perhaps befitting then (if not *unsurprising*), that arguably Michelangelo's most celebrated work should depict a mortal man endowed with the hand of a god. Unveiled on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 1504, Michelangelo's *David* was originally commissioned for the eastern roofline of Florence Cathedral, though as the statue neared completion, its eventual positioning was changed to a public square, the work standing before the Palazzo della Signoria (the seat of the Florentine government). In notable contrast to earlier depictions of the biblical hero (such as Donatello's bronze portrayal of c.1430, visioning David standing triumphantly astride the severed head of Goliath), Michelangelo's work images David, not in victorious conquest following his battle with the monster, but *prior* to the duel itself. The eyes are fixed upon a distant horizon, watchful of the approaching enemy, the great right hand, tense and vascular (and rendered at least a third larger than life-size), hangs by the hero's side, the *weapon*, imbued with the power of divine authority to slay an indomitable foe.

Numerous commentators (including Campbell (1992) and Murray (1984)) have asserted that, from its conception, Michelangelo's *David* was assumed as an expressly politicised work, utilising widely understood iconography to mobilise a swell of civic unification within the Florentine populace. A significant shift away from the purely devotional imperative guiding much of the religious imagery produced at the time. Florence, like many conurbations of sixteenth century Italy, existed as an independent city-state, continually vigilant of threats to its borders. With the exile of the Medici (a powerful banking family and political dynasty) from Florence by Piero II in 1494, and the knowledge that the family (now banished to Rome) plotted to re-take dominion over the city, Michelangelo's statue, standing within the courtyard of the Palazzo della Signoria, became a symbol of the new Republican Government.

For this reason, in its original location, the statue was angled such that *David's* gaze was directed to the south, out through the walls of the city, to Rome. Recall the comparison made by Plotinus (outlined earlier) between our encounter with the art object and the fate of Narcissus. That we *reflect* upon the work in some literal sense, seeing our own conceptions of the world mirrored back at us, re-articulated by the object. For the population of Florence then, what may the experience of Michelangelo's statue elicited within them? Witnessing *David's* wary expression fixed upon the southern horizon, toward Rome and the might of the Medici, just as their own thoughts would turn toward such lingering threats.

Seeing the right hand, poised and powerful, that which was capable of overcoming the once invincible opponent. To be, in confrontation with the artist's mastery, instilled with the beauty of heroism, and the implicit moral righteousness of standing before an adversary far greater than oneself.



Michelangelo Buonarroti | **David** – (restoration) Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze | 1504 (Fig. 3.1)

In traversing the distances innate within (and surrounding) the auric artwork, we are immersed in a journey of transformative potential, this accumulation of (physical and intellectual) understanding is internalised; we absorb some part of the artwork within ourselves, seeing this reflected back at us by the object itself. We are reflected in the artwork and it in us; its beauty becomes our own. *For example, consider someone encountering Michelangelo's statue that is unaware of the biblical narrative it depicts, upon learning the story they return to the work and see this new knowledge they have acquired*

*mirrored back at them; the story re-told through the artist's visual vocabulary in the context of the present moment.*

It is vital to highlight a point of distinction here, between the notion of the politicised art object as this applies to Michelangelo's statue of David and to the increasingly political 'underpinnings' of the art object as outlined in Benjamin's writing. With the case of *David*, we see an artist combining a widely understood item of religious iconography with a particular spatio-temporal setting; embedding the work in the geo-political circumstances of its historical period of creation. The work is both site and time specific, requiring a level of auric *immersion* on behalf of its viewer to reveal its significance and to mold their political sensibilities by extension. Such a process demands that the work of art (and the artist themselves) are held with high esteem, their message being one of critical import and apprehended with a seriousness beyond that of aesthetic spectacle.

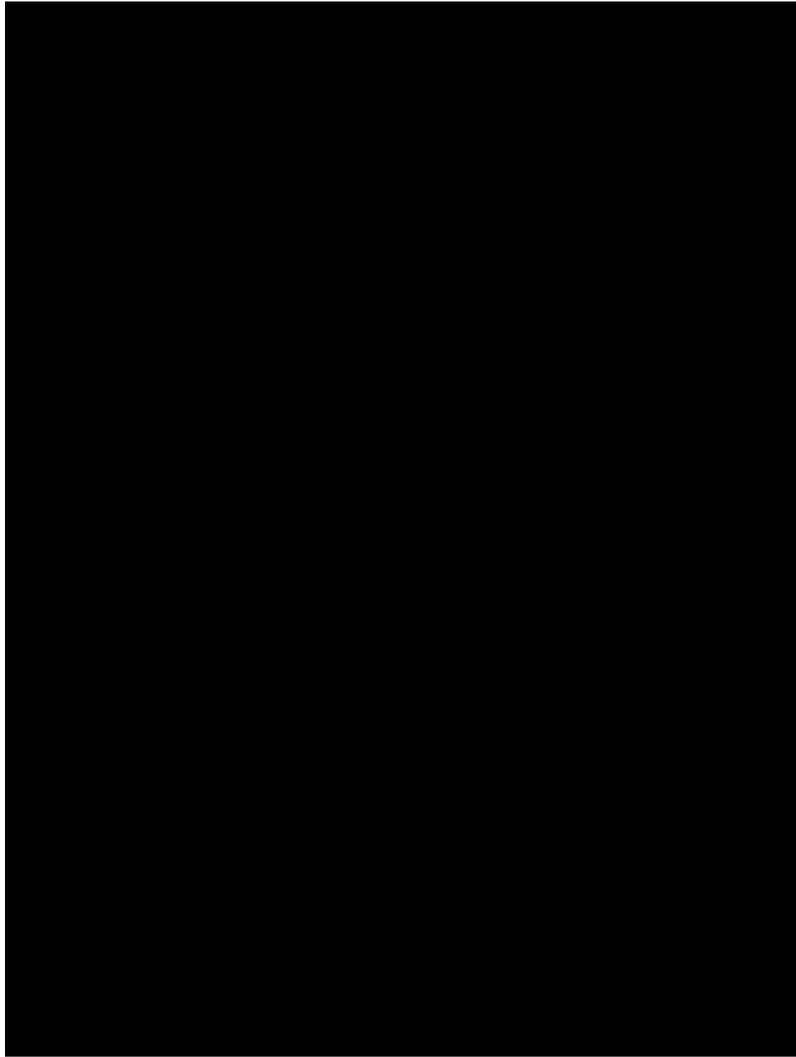
Conversely, for Benjamin, mechanical reproduction's *politicisation* of the art object came as a result of the democratising influence it exerted. The object once tethered to a museum, gallery or distant, exotic location (and only seen or owned by the wealthy) could be reproduced at little cost and made accessible to many more people. For Benjamin, film was to be the medium most adept at fulfilling this egalitarian ideal, making possible 'the involvement of the masses in culture and politics; it makes possible mass culture and mass politics' (Kazis 2004). The viewer is no longer immersed, traversing the auric distances of the artwork, but 'distracted' (Benjamin regarding 'immersion' and 'distraction' as binary opposites), the object consumed by the masses and encouraging their collective mobilisation (Benjamin 2008, p.35). Within this, the dislocation between the artist and wider society is seen to be lessened, the notions of 'creativity', 'genius' and 'everlasting value' (p.2) applied to (and qualifying) the figure of the 'heroic' artist no longer required by art's new social agenda. As Benjamin writes:

because of the absolute weight placed on its display value, the work of art is becoming an image with entirely new functions, of which the one we are aware of, namely the artistic function, stands out as one that may subsequently be deemed incidental.

(Benjamin 2008, p.13)

For Benjamin then, the false distinctions between the social roles of artists and educators are negated (Kazis 2004), the artist assuming (or perhaps returning to) a more *terrestrial* guise, more the 'skilled tradesman' than the numinous figure of Renaissance Humanism. In hindsight, Benjamin's assertions that the cult-like allure of the revered art object (and artist) could be pressed into the service of Fascism are interesting to examine. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 1938, in a carefully orchestrated ceremony, Mussolini guided Adolf Hitler (the now Führer of Germany with pretensions of artistic connoisseurship) through a tour of Florence's cultural highlights. In a speech from a balcony hanging above the Palazzo della Signoria, Mussolini tacitly imbued Michelangelo's statue with a profusion of defiled meaning to the assembled masses below; the work now a celebration of Aryan masculinity and dominance, a hymn to the creed of militarism. Benjamin's fear for art's Fascist institutionalisation may be viewed as warranted in such circumstances, though it may be argued that its assignment to any political project may pave way for similar distortions; the aura's decline promoting all interpretive meanings to equivalent validity, even those construed to serve devastating ends.

In a time though of less consequential ideological fervor (at least in the developed world), the implications of the aura's erosion can still be vividly discerned. Through endless reproduction, the once rarefied object can become so prevalent, its image so ever-present within the popular consciousness, that its prestige is undermined, perhaps irreparably, becoming susceptible to the misrepresentations of caricature and parody.



ArmaLite, Inc. USA | **AR-50A1: A Work Of Art** – Advertisement | 2014 (Fig. 3.2)

The advertisement above was released by the American arms company *ArmaLite* in March of 2014. Depicting Michelangelo's *David*, crudely brandishing one of the company's firearms, the poster seeks to vicariously associate (though comically) the statue's heroic essence with the wielding of an *ArmaLite* rifle. However, the predominant reasoning behind the usage of this statue is neither its subject matter nor its historical significances, rather, that this is a work universally familiar to the public, becoming the punch line to a joke that everyone can be *in on*. The Italian authorities (owners of the copyright for *David* in commercial usage), outraged by the campaign, issued numerous public statements calling for its withdrawal, Angelo Tartuferi, director of Florence's Accademia Gallery, telling the *Repubblica* newspaper that the 'law says that the aesthetic value of the work cannot be distorted' and subsequently that in this case, 'not only is the choice in bad taste but also completely

illegal'<sup>46</sup>. Note that Tartuferi's objections refer only to an *aesthetic* distortion rather than to one of interpretive meaning. Naturally (within UK law at least), deformation (whether libel or slander) cannot be assigned or brought on behalf of the deceased, but the focus of Tartuferi's comments do point toward an apparent weighting of priority; cultural preservation concerned with safeguarding a work's material attributes more so than its conceptual content.

Like the *Mona Lisa* (so decried by the *Futurist Manifesto*) the image of Michelangelo's *David* has reach a level of cultural saturation as to boarder on self-parody. Such objects can become a form of *camp pastiche* of 'The Great Work of Art' endlessly aped and satirised, their reproductions so prevalent as to render the object somehow 'ironic' to the modern audience. Of course, such artworks still attract vast audiences to their presence (the *Mona Lisa* currently pulling in over 6 million viewers annually) though it may be argued that this is merely a result of the work's *fame*, evidencing no immersed engagement with the object's auric constituents. Within the age of *celebrity*, where the media can manufacture global stardom predicated on nothing more than an individual *being known*, it is perhaps unsurprising that the historic artifact's recognition may be enabled to subsist in a similar fashion; though one may question just how sustainable a situation this is, whether baseless fame is of an inevitable transience.

Should we seek to avoid this, the aura's retention must assume a level of priority, its authority certified by a rejuvenated belief in the *heroic* and the values that this expresses. In our increasingly secular societies, we must form our own values rather than having these prescribed. The work of art, as an expression of human capability, has the potential to fulfill these desires, though only if its cultural identity ascends to the heights demanded by such responsibility. With technology, as Benjamin foresees, ushering in the demise of the aura (that which is essential for the artworks cultural primacy) we must engage in a project of continually reaffirming our values in the face of technological change; rather than our new-found capabilities shaping these in ways that divorce us from our innate attributions of worth.

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<sup>46</sup> The outrage of the Italian authorities to this advertisement is documented in a *Telegraph* article dated 9<sup>th</sup> of March 2014. This can be accessed here: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/italian-government-up-in-arms-over-michelangelos-david-rifle-advert-9179620.html>

Famously, Arthur C. Clarke (in the third of his three laws) noted that, ‘any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic’ (Clarke 1962), I would argue that we cannot allow this to be the case. Rather, that we must continually perceive the human being within (or in relation too) the technologies that we construct around us, knowing them as products of our own design that must be utilised in pursuit of values that emanate from *ourselves*. The manned space mission will always conjure more romantic fascination than the unmanned probe, the chess Grandmaster (such as Garry Kasparov) will always hold a heroic quality that we cannot ascribe to even the most brilliant digital player (such as *Deep Blue*). The heroic is a declaration of human capability, one that must be continually reevaluated as our technologically enabled faculties advance; as each new horizon is breached we must turn and face the next.

The 18<sup>th</sup> of February 1564 saw the death of Michelangelo Buonarroti, three days earlier, on the 15<sup>th</sup>, Galileo was born; a piece of historical trivia, but one that is perhaps telling of a distinct cultural milieu in the blossoming potentials of human beings to reshape the world around themselves. Galileo, who would explain the Copernican theory of the sun-centric universe, divorcing the earth from its long established position at the centre of all creation. In such grand awakenings in our sense of *place*, we are offered the chance to learn more about who we are.

Writing in her essay ‘Yves Klein and the Blue of Distance’ (2005) Rebecca Solnit begins with comparing the artist to a number of heroic figures, each unified by their individual disappearances over some distant horizon:

When I think of the artist Yves Klein, I think of those absolutists who preceded him by a generation or two, those who vanished, think of the boxer and Dadaist poet Arthur Craven who in 1918 was supposed to leave Mexico to meet his new wife in Argentina but was never seen again; of Everett Ruess, the bohemian who might have become an artist or writer had he not disappeared into the mountains of Utah at the age of twenty in 1934, leaving behind a final signature carved into the rock: “Nemo” or “no one”; of the aviator Amelia Earhart who disappeared over the Pacific in 1937; of the pilot Antoine de Saint-Exupery who left behind several lapidary books before his plane too disappeared, in 1944, in the Mediterranean. They were all saddled with a desire to appear in the world and a desire to go as far as possible that was a will to disappear from it. In the ambition was a desire to make over the world as it should be; but in the disappearances was the desire to live as though it had been made over, to refashion oneself into a hero who disappeared not only into the sky, the sea, the wilderness, but into a conception of self, into legend, into the heights of possibility.

(Solnit 2005, p.176)



CHAPTER

IV

TECHNOLOGY: THE FRANTIC  
ABOLITION OF DISTANCE

## Introduction

Following on from the discussion of Benjamin's aura (and its indispensable requirements for *distance* outlined earlier), this chapter will confront technology's propensity for eradicating one's spatio-temporal understandings. With particular reference to the works of Paul Virilio and Friedrich Kittler, this chapter will seek to reveal key characteristics of our present technological landscape, their implications and antecedents, and consequently, the underlying vulnerabilities that threaten the art object's auric integrity.

To begin with, the interconnected relationship between *speed*, *distance* and *time* will be considered; noting the ways in which fluctuations in our comprehension of one of these phenomena is affecting of how we conceive of the others. In consideration of this, we will look to developments in transportation technologies (including the proliferation of rail travel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) noting this ways in which this was thought to increasingly detach the human being from previously uncontested spatio-temporal knowledge. The implications of a perceived *acceleration* of contemporary life will also be explored, suggesting our increasing appetite for speed and boundless accessibility, and the *contagious* effect of this as it spreads into multiple domains of experience.

Subsequently, the thoughts of Virilio will be examined, noting his concept of 'Real Time' and the obscurifying effect this has on our perceptions of time and place. Indeed, it will be argued that we are progressively moving toward a situation of eternal *placelessness*, in which any location can exist (to some extent) simultaneously in any other, terminally undermining our innate comprehensions of spatial proximity and the very concept of *local time*.

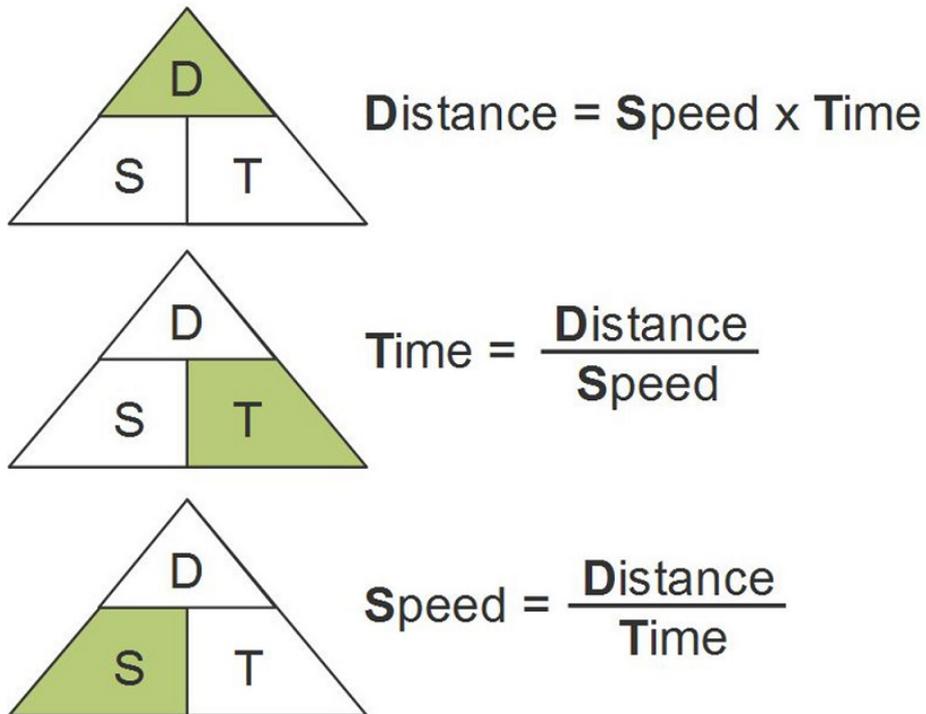
Building upon this, the *homogenising* effects of the standardised technological (typically screen-based) interface will be explored, noting its ramifications for the assumed authenticity of our encounters and ones ability to derive a sense of somatic [bodily] *nearness* from them. The constituent aspects of the physical encounter (such as scale and materiality) that are cast aside though such interfaces will be identified, assessing their significance within our experiences and their role in our attributions of worth.

Kittler's writing will then be considered in light of this formalisation of our experiences with a variety of (previously discrepant and self-contained) media. The illusory, or fraudulent character Kittler ascribes to the digital image will be contemplated, and his work overlapped with Virilio's, forming assertions towards a defined cultural condition that may be increasingly visible within our contemporary circumstances.

This chapter will then consider a range of creative works that reflect the contemporary conditions of technologically induced fluctuations in our conceptions of space. Latterly within this chapter, I will also reflect upon some of my own projects as a practicing artist that have been informed by the focus of this study. Creating works that are tied intimately to specific sites, and that only exist within a defined window of time, such works pursue the antithesis of technological telepresence and its endemic spatial distortions.

In summation, it will be proposed that the art object, and its auric nature, can be seen to play an increasingly significant role in today's world; reconnecting us to the spatio-temporal understandings that technologies incrementally contrive to annihilate.

## I. Speed equals distance over time



sofatutor.com | Speed, Distance & Time formulae | 2016 (Fig 4.1)

The recognisable formulae above, commonly learned by students of elementary mathematics, demonstrate the interconnected relationships between *speed*, *distance* and *time*; the knowledge of two of these as numerical quantities enabling us to determine the third. As such, if we are unable to ascertain the value (in the quantitative sense) of (for instance) *distance* and *speed*, then we are unable to accurately define the auxiliary value of *time*. In consideration of this, perhaps we may suggest that it is not merely mathematical certainty that can be sacrificed in this way, but our ability to fathom and cognitively assimilate such values as they apply to physical phenomena. The light speed transit of digital information over fibre optic networks assume velocities that, whilst calculable, are perhaps beyond the capacities of the human being to physically comprehend; a single photon of light (travelling at 186,282.397 miles per second) able to circumnavigate the planet earth approximately seven and a half times in the space of a single second. Apprehending such ferocious speed when mapped onto such brevity of temporal duration, the distances travelled can become somehow hypothetical and *unreal*; the feeling that space itself must have *contracted* as we rationalise its accelerated surmounting through the

lens of our own physical capacities, those which are intrinsically incapable of such a feat. As Heidegger writes in the 1971 essay *The Thing*:

ALL DISTANCES IN TIME AND SPACE ARE SHRINKING. Man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel. He now receives instant information, by radio, of events which he formerly learned about only years later, if at all [...] Man puts the longest distances behind him in the shortest time. He puts the greatest distances behind himself and thus puts everything before himself at the shortest range. Yet, the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance.

(Heidegger, 2009, p.113)

Heidegger's conception of nearness, using the German word 'nahe' (to be near) does not pertain to spatial proximity so much as it does an emotional *closeness* or affinity with the object of perception. Such a closeness can be seen as instrumental in the assignment of value within our experiences and Heidegger clearly articulates the undermining effect that technological mediation has upon this attribution. If this nearness does not consist in shortness of distance, then it must be that it emerges elsewhere in our encounters, somewhere prior to the encounter itself. It can be argued therefore, that it is in our journey *toward* the object that its value is forged, in the crossing of the distance that separates us and the knowledge that is built upon through this undertaking. It is the links that bind our experiences together that allows us to derive value from one encounter to the next, adrift in isolation, such events are meaningless. As has been suggested, technology and its new possibilities, by their very nature, break our links to the world; manifestations of our desire to surpass our own limitations, the very limitations that contextualise our lived-experience and render it as intelligible and meaningful.

Consider, as Heidegger does, the experience one is faced with when travelling by aeroplane. After the rush of acceleration, the ground falls away and for a time our new aspect on the earth below transforms our perception of it, a runway, an airport and soon an entire city is regarded in its entirety. A new understanding of this place is allowed to emerge from our elevated position; we may even imagine a

grander sense of the interconnected lives of the people going about their business far beneath us. However, climbing through cloud, into an environment that is increasingly alien, we are ever more cut-off from the outside and the journey that we are undertaking. We feel no pressure from the air streaming past at hundreds of miles per hour, no connection to the route being charted or the engines fighting against the pull of gravity. We sit motionless, and let a distant place come toward us. Each with our own narrow window, a series of square, sequential views run down the length of the fuselage, boxed-off from each other like the cells of a film-strip. The environment outside becomes hypothetical and meaningless, the innocuous domesticity of the cabin permitting no physical comprehension of the world beyond its walls; save for a personal shifting image, rendered upon a small frame of glass.

From this, we may point towards a common trajectory in technological advancement, that it is consistently set upon the eradication of *distance* (the essential qualifier of the *aura*, as discussed in the previous chapter) through a process of obscurification within our encounters; technologies navigating such expanses in ways that defy meaningful, physical comprehension and subsequently excluding us from Heidegger's concept of *nearness*. It is interesting to consider that the *newness* of various technologies seems to bring such spatio-temporal dilations into a much sharper focus; once a technology has reached a level of cultural ubiquity its distortions of our lived experience often appear to evaporate within the popular consciousness. Perhaps this is expressive of technology's natural transience (that it is successively outmoded by new emergent devices), or perhaps that our conceptions of the world have become inadvertently altered to accommodate it; grappling to re-orient ourselves as the *plate tectonics* of the technological landscape shift beneath our feet. The once revolutionary machine becomes commonplace, the world is all but unchanged, yet our place within it fades into memory.

Writing in *The Railway Journey: The Industrialisation of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (1979), Wolfgang Scievelbush characterises such changes in spatio-temporal perception as brought about by train travel; a development which represents a significant twist in the fabric of the technological landscape and our personal perceptions of the crossing of distance. Characterising the effects of railroad travel in the early nineteenth-century as the 'annihilation of space and time' (p.33), Scievelbush identifies the acceleration of personal locomotion as an initiator in the perceived shrinking of distance.

With engines travelling at roughly three times the speed of a stagecoach, which had until then been a primary mode of transportation, Scievelbush writes that:

What was experienced as being annihilated was the traditional space-time continuum which had characterised the old transport technology. Organically embedded in nature as it was, the technology, in its mimetic relationship to the space traversed, permitted the traveller to perceive that space as a living entity [...] the railroad did not appear embedded in the space of the landscape the way the coach and highway are, but seemed to strike its way through it.

(Scievelbush 1979, p.36)

As such, the developments of rail travel are seen by Scievelbush to have terminally undermined established understandings of the crossing of distance, travellers losing the implicit attachment they once felt to the journey being undertaken by losing the capacity to physically relate with the new mechanisms of transportation. Whilst the stagecoach was intimately connected to the landscape through which it travelled, horses requiring rest and water, favouring even ground and susceptible to climactic changes; the railroad disconnected travellers from such external concerns. Additionally, the rigid line of the track did not permit changes in the route to be made, travellers handing over a sense of personal navigation to the mechanisms of the vehicle itself; a personal understanding of the distance being crossed was therefore rendered unnecessary. Bergson's notion of *durée* (meaning *distance*, the time spent in getting from one place to another on the road) is applicable here, pertaining, as it does, not to an objective mathematical unit, but to a subjective perception of space-time (Bergson 1889); one infinitely mutable by the mechanisms of travel.

However, the railroad did not just affect a personal understanding *of* and connection *to* a journey, perhaps more significantly, the very conception of *place* was considerably changed. When a distinct location becomes accessible within a fraction of the time it once was (and the journey to it is subsumed by the workings of a new technology) our understanding of that place may be conspicuously transformed in-turn. With the opening of a new line between Paris and Rouen in 1843, Heinrich Hein

describes a sense of disorientation, upon sensing the geographical reality of a country warping beyond recognition.

What changes must now occur, in our way of looking at things, in our notions! Even the elementary concepts of time and space have begun to vacillate. Space is killed by the railways, and we are left with time alone [...] Now you can travel to Orleans in four and a half hours, and it takes no longer to get to Rouen. Just imagine what will happen when the lines to Belgium and Germany have been completed and connected up with their railways! I feel as if the mountains and forests of all countries were advancing on Paris. Even now I can smell the German linden trees; the North Sea's breakers are rolling against my door.

(Hein 1854, p.360)

Hein's thoughts here point toward a further trend in technological advancement, that it elicits an insatiable *appetite for speed* (denoting an escalating *veneration of time*) that is expressed by the *obliteration of distance*. We seek to overcome distances at ever increasing velocities in order that we can claw back the time that was once bound up within it. As Erikson notes on the contemporary (and contagious) demands for progressively *boosted* speeds:

If one gets used to speed in some areas, the desire for speed will tend to spread to new domains. Five minutes spent waiting for the bus lasts longer the faster the airport express train takes you from the terminal to the bus stop. As computer networks have become faster, many of us have become accustomed to an Internet connection where waiting time is in principle, and often in practice, minimal. Still, we will not rest content until the web pages are accessed the very same moment we press the button<sup>47</sup>. Two seconds of waiting time today is as unacceptable as 10 seconds would have been a couple of years ago.

(Erikson 2001, p.273)

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<sup>47</sup> According to Ofcom, average UK Internet download speed increased from 12Mbps (in March 2013) to 28.9Mbps (in March 2016). Yet, despite vastly improved loading times, one may be struck by the feeling (as Erikson elucidates here) that slow internet speed is just as frustrating today as it has always been; explicative of our continually increased expectations.

Recalling here the cultural conditions expressed by Huxley in his *Brave New World*, in which a character proclaims their annoyance at a delay of ‘forty seconds on a six and a half hour flight’ (Huxley 2007, p.86), it is interesting to reflect upon Erikson’s assertion that our expectations of speed and instantaneous accessibility in some areas of life have a tendency to spread to other domains; Gere (2006) arguing that such *acceleration* in contemporary life has led to a condition of ‘cultural anxiety’, whilst Lee & Liebenau (2001) articulate a social *stasis* of continual distraction. Such cultural characteristics are surely inhibiting with regards to the crossing of distance (both spatial and temporal) and can be seen as posing further threat to the perceived authority of the first-hand encounter; its *inconvenience* becoming a prohibitive factor rather than qualifying its auric attraction. Reflecting back again upon the cultural conditions outlined in the first chapter of this study, such circumstances, and their implications for the perceived authority of physical cultural institutions are important to note. For the online encounter (with its innumerable potential locations, and consequently always at-hand and ever-present) is enabled by this very *placelessness*, the speed-of-light transmission to our every location now perceptibly (though in some sense deceptively) instantaneous.

Such uprooting of established understandings of *places* and the distances between them is demonstrated by Scievelbush, using the example of commodity goods; once tied to their specific places of origin, the nature of these objects is fundamentally altered by advancing methods of transportation. Quoting Marx, Scievelbush infers that the transportation of goods to market is the process by which they are turned into commodities; severing the links that once tied them to their sites of production. Referring to a change in the perception of farmed produce, Scievelbush writes that:

No longer was it seen in the context of the original locality of its place of production but in the new locality of the market-place: cherries offered for sale in the Paris market were seen as products of that market, just as Normandy seemed to be a product of the railroad that takes you there.

(Scievelbush 1979, p.41)

Object and experience is ripped from its spatio-temporal context, adrift within an abstracted, notional space and divorced from physical comprehension. Our sense of affinity to the object recedes, becoming an inconceivable presence existing beyond our knowable frames of reference.

Parallels can be drawn here to Benjamin's aura (as outlined in the previous chapter), in the diminished state of authenticity that a distant location (such as Normandy in Scievelbush's writing) once assumed. Whilst it would be incongruous to suggest that advancements in transportation in some sense *replicated* distant places and offered them up as *nearer* ones (see Jean Baudrillard 1994), Benjamin's aura is still very much affected by the capacity of these new innovations. The object's place 'where it happens to be' is unchanged, but, as has been suggested, our deep understanding of that place in which it resides *has* fundamentally altered around it. The secluded and the remote lose this very quality whilst remaining materially unaltered. The rare and the exotic are prized so highly that we are willed to banish the barriers that keep them from us and in doing so, we destroy the very qualities of scarcity and mystery that we once so valued. Yet, the power of our resolve to conquer distance is insatiable, technology of ever escalating complexity and means crushing the expanses that stretch out before us, the distant horizon a continual challenge that must be overcome. Technologies become increasingly divorced from our own physical capabilities and as such our ability to relate to and comprehend the distances that they effortlessly transcend grows ever more unattainable. As Virilio writes:

For what doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his only soul?' Lets not forget that to gain also means to reach, to get to, as much as to conquer or possess. Losing one's soul, anima, means losing the very being of movement.

Historically, we thus find ourselves faced with a sort of great divide in knowing how to be in the world: on the one hand, there is the original nomad for whom the journey, the being's trajectory, are dominant. On the other, there is the sedentary man for whom subject and object prevail, movement towards the immovable, the inert, characterizing the sedentary urban 'civilian' in contrast to the 'warrior' nomad.

(Virilio 1997, p.25)

Here we see Virilio articulate a central conflict of technologically mediated experience, our longing for a direct, material engagement with the world being at odds with the means by which our encounters are increasingly played out. Virilio comments that, "in the past, if you wanted to know what temperature it was, you looked out the window and saw if it was nice out or not. Today, you turn on the television to get the news and the weather" (Virilio 1996, p.67). Thus, Virilio sees that contemporary societies are increasingly detached from the physical world, turning to technology for guidance on the weather being, for many, no longer a counterintuitive manoeuvre (see Beard & Gunn 2002). Instead, he insists that, "advanced audiovisual and automotive technologies have denatured direct observation and common sense" (Virilio 1991, p.111), our actions performed vicariously through broadcast or online technologies, despite the negative influence this may elicit upon our faculties (consider again here the notion of the *Competitive Cognitive Artefact* examined in the first chapter of this study).

For Virilio then, we are progressively witnessing (and interacting with) the world through a narrow lens, the screen of technological interface that (as Kittler notes) is a fundamentally illusory image granting no real knowledge of (or *nearness* to) the object depicted, a mode of interaction Virilio describes as 'teleobjective' or 'tele-existence' (1997, p.37). Such forms of telepresent interaction are considered to truncate our spatio-temporal perceptions, rendering the notion of *place* as a meaningless construct and consequently *time* as one perpetual, ever-present:

How can we really live if there is no more here and if everything is now? How can we survive the instantaneous telescoping of a reality that has become ubiquitous, breaking up into two orders of time, each as real as the other: that of presence here and now, and that of a telepresence at a distance, beyond the horizon of tangible appearances?

How can we rationally manage to split, not only between virtual and actual realities but, more to the point, between the apparent horizon and the transparent horizon of a screen that suddenly opens up a kind of temporal window for us to interact elsewhere, often a long way away?

(Virilio 1997, p.37)

The phenomenon of a space's perceived compression (and the knock-on alterations of this for our conceptions of time) is labelled by Virilio (perhaps ironically) as being a confrontation with 'Real Time' (1997, p.10), the term denoting the ways that our perceptions are shaped by technologies that place the *not-here here*, within the field of one's present moment. Reiterating the words of Paul Klee who stated that: "To define the present in isolation is to kill it" (p.10), Virilio goes on to state that this, 'is what the teletechnologies of real time are doing: they are killing 'present' time by isolating it from its here and now, in favour of a commutative elsewhere that no longer has anything to do with our 'concrete presence' in the world' (p.10). In such a way, for Virilio, 'Real Time' (or 'world time') negates the relationship between spatial (or global) positioning and linear temporal duration; the loss of one rendering the other as unintelligible.

Human beings exist in three dimensions of chronological time—past, present, and future. It is obvious that the liberation of the present—real time or world time—runs the risk of making us lose the past and future in favor of a presentification, which amounts to an amputation of the volume of time. Time is volume; [...] It is volume and depth of meaning, and the emergence of one world time eliminating the multiplicity of local times is a considerable loss for both geography and history.

(Virilio 1999, p.81)

The elimination of the world's multiplicity of local times (these coalesced into a single, enduring *present*) is seen to engender a form of widespread cultural *disorientation*. "Presence is only presence at a distance", as Maurice Blanchot writes (1971), for Virilio, this loss of spatio-temporal distances renders present 'Real Time' (with the loss of a fixed horizon line) as a *vertigo* inducing experience. In much the same way as the photograph freezes time and space, collapsing the image's horizon line and flattening its depth onto a lens (Virilio 1999, p.21), Virilio looks to Italian Renaissance art (with the arrival of pictorial perspective and the *vanishing point*), suggesting that this may have constituted an early form of such spatial bewilderment caused by a new form of spatial representation.

It has often been said that vertigo was caused by looking at vertical lines converging on a point. Might the real-space perspective of the Italian Renaissance then be an early form of

vertigo arising from the visible horizon, **a horizontal vertigo** caused by a time freeze in the intersection of vanishing lines?

(Virilio 1997, p.27)

As we have seen, technologies engage in a process of upturning our understandings of space and place, the interconnected relationship between *speed*, *distance* and *time* detaching us from a fixed horizon against which we may orient ourselves. Spatial *disorientation* is a phenomenon often recounted by aircraft pilots and deep-water divers; denoting a sudden inability to correctly determine one's position within an environment. The loss of a visual horizon divorces the human being from an environmental constant against which one's own location can be understood. We enter a state of *vertigo*, of confusion and panic, in which the stability of a once immovable spatial knowledge is withdrawn; a knowledge that we innately utilise in our self-identification. Yet, the technologies that we create engage in a process of upturning space through facilitating new capacities and methods of its negotiation. Such devices mirror a desire for surmounting spatial knowledge and surpassing the distances that once defined it; the implications of this forcing a continual re-evaluation of ourselves, our desires and priorities.

Technologies are a product of design, requiring creativity within pre-defined parameters that describe the nature of a function (they are, as Heidegger (1977) notes, defined by such *instrumentality*). Additionally, these parameters articulate an objective or goal requiring fulfilment, technological advancements evolving solutions to these priorities on an upwards trajectory towards ever greater capacity, complexity and efficiency. Overcoming such *gaps*, between a previously unattainable goal and its completion, is the task to which technology has been conceived to meet; in doing so, we reshape the world in accordance with the new abilities afforded to us. Yet, more than any physical manipulation of our environments that new technologies permit, it is our *conceptions* of the world that change. We define our environments by our own capacity to negotiate or otherwise affect them (as in Heidegger's second, *anthropological* definition of technology); technologies becoming a lens through which the world appears in continual flux in relation to our advancing faculties.

However, the burgeoning potential to re-form our environments and to exceed the innate limitations of our physical ability brings no greater feeling of authority, security or personal sense of understanding of the world around us. Indeed, as has been suggested, the defining social characteristic of the digital age is one of a *cultural anxiety* (Gere 2006); a sense of instability and bombardment where one's knowledge of their surroundings is no longer perennially assured. As an adaptable species we have continually surmounted external environmental forces, but how can we respond to a fluctuating landscape that is driven by our own desire for progression and built upon the tenets of technologies that surpass the utility of man alone?

Our *place* therefore, is no longer forced upon us, but is constructed by decision, perception and the weighting of priority. Space itself is in motion, but what is at stake for the properties of it from which we derive significance? Are the perceived worths of the remote, the scare and the hard-to-reach, merely relics that technological intervention may undermine? Does the increased ubiquity of digital experience detract from the value of physical encounters, or is the reverse true, that the physical becomes scarcer yet more revered? Can we envisage a future where the idea of *place* becomes meaningless? Such questions examine our trajectories, in a time when the boundaries of space are blurring into obscurity; within such disorientation, when we may no longer distinguish our spatial parameters, perhaps we must find methods to stabilise our conceptions of place, our *values* coming to define the horizons we look toward.

## **II. On homogenisation**

As outlined in Virilio's writing, telespresence via technological interface, enabling the human being to conceive the world as a *placeless* (and correspondingly *timeless*) continuum, has the effect of *merging* our encounters, everything taking place through the narrow lens of digital mediation.

Such homogenisation of sensory experience is commented upon by artists Eric Fischl and April Gornik (2011), who note a 'levelling' of digital information (p.145) whereby everything is seen to assume common characteristics, particularly with regards to *scale*. As Fischl and Gornik suggest:

Art objects contain a dynamism based on scale and physicality that produces a somatic response in the viewer. The powerful visual experience of art locates the viewer very precisely as an integrated self within the artist's vision. With the flattening of visual information and the randomness of size inherent in reproduction, the significance of scale is eroded. Visual information becomes based on image alone. Experience is replaced with facsimile.

(Fischl & Gornik 2011, p.145)

With the relatively uniform size of personal, screen-based, electronic media, we lose this 'somatic'<sup>48</sup> knowledge of the art object in relation to ourselves. Equally, such a 'flattening' of visual information (Virilio's collapsed spatial horizon) cannot accurately convey optical depth, we lose the ability to navigate ourselves (spatially) around the object and experience it in a material context that is revealing of its physicality. Recalling the digital museological formats discussed in the first chapter (such as *Google Art & Culture*), we see that they simultaneously enable an encounter whilst detaching us from this somatic understanding, as Fischl and Gornik go on to note: 'The world pictured as pictures does not deliver the experience of art as seen and experienced physically. It is possible for an art-experienced person to "translate" what is seen online, but the experience is necessarily remote' (p.145). Again, it is worth noting that advances in VR techniques are increasingly allowing distant locals to be navigated in ways that simulate direct, bodily encounters, though it is important to remember that what we are experiencing here is still a form of photography; still images (pictures) flashed in an ordered sequence to convey the impression of self-directed movement. In his 1978 essay *The Uses of Photography*, John Berger points to the nature of the photographic image as being that of a 'memory device', one that enables us to *forget* (p.54). For Fischl and Gornik, the Internet enacts a similar displacement upon the art object, replacing the way we come to 'know' it (p.146).

In another discussion of Internet-enabled experience (and its essential uniformity), artist and novelist Douglas Coupland articulates a more positive appraisal, in which (counter to the perspectives of Virilio) the writer describes how such technologies have granted a *greater* (perhaps more *objective*) comprehension of spatial geographies. Coupland stating that:

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<sup>48</sup> Relating to the body, especially as distinct from the mind.

The Internet has certainly demystified my sense of geography and travel. On Google Maps, I've explored remote Antarctic valleys as well as Robert Smithson's sculptural earthwork "Spiral Jetty". And we've all taken BlackBerrys everywhere. In so many ways, anywhere is basically as good as anywhere else.

(Coupland 2011, p.161)

Whilst Coupland's view is essentially optimistic, there are obviously significant liabilities embedded within his last statement. Spatial proximities are no longer hierarchised, rather, everywhere becomes of equivalent significance as any location can be experienced in any other. Coupland's evocation of Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* as an object that can be meaningfully encountered digitally may arguably undermine the essential essence of the work, its unique existence on the remote north-eastern shore of Utah's Great Salt Lake. Reflecting Smithson's desire to reconnect with the landscape and escape the gallery prerogatives of commercialism and commodification, it is perhaps ironic (if not paradoxical) that Coupland should advocate an encounter with this work through the medium of *Google*. In 1969, just prior to Smithson embarking upon the work, Neil Armstrong had become the first human being to set foot on the surface of the moon, such cultural circumstances reflected by *Spiral Jetty* as mankind reevaluated its relationship with the cosmos. The work resembles a galaxy in form, the spectator enjoined to walk around it in an anti-clockwise direction; thereby prompted, not just to reflect upon cosmology, but also to traverse backwards through geological time. The work's physical dwarfing of the human being (in testament to the grandeur of nature) is lost in its photographic representation (as discussed above); its connection to the landscape (submerged and then reappearing as the lake's water level fluctuates) is frozen in an ever-present moment: unencumbered by the laws of material existence, the arrow of time spins in zero-gravity.

### **III. Practice Based Exploration**

In consideration of artists (such as Smithson), who's works demand (or seek to instill) a comprehension of *placeness*, I will now explore the outcomes of my collaborative placement with Liverpool's

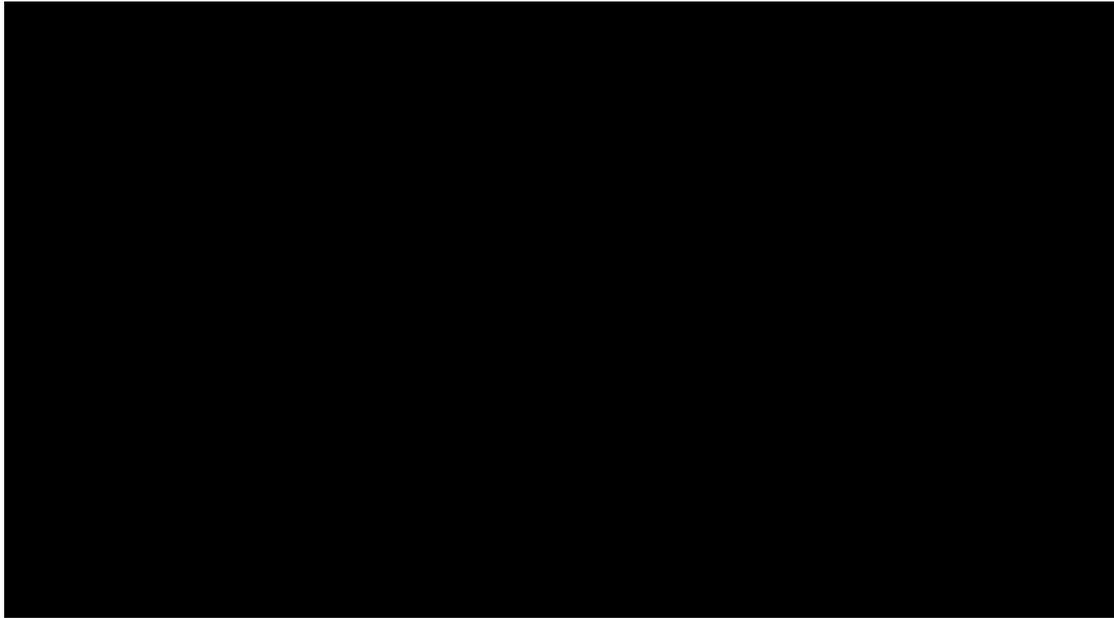
Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (FACT), in examining the rationale of numerous creative projects focused upon the implications of emergent technologies and their potential to transform our once uncontested assumptions about space and place. Through analysis of these works, artist interviews and audience feedback, I will reflect upon the ways in which artists can assimilate new technologies, challenging our preconceptions of their functioning and empowering audiences to question their ramifications as agents of cultural change. Latterly within this section, I will also reflect upon some of my own projects as a practicing artist that have been informed by the focus of this study. Creating works that are tied intimately to specific sites, and that only exist within a defined window of time, such works pursue the antithesis of technological telepresence and its endemic spatial distortions. The value of such approaches and their relevance to our contemporary situation will be considered, asking: how can we retain a somatic relationship to space and place in a time of escalating non-locality?

### **1. The Drawing Room**

In September 2013 (18<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>), through my collaboration with FACT, I worked with Canadian artist Luc Courchesne to deliver an exhibition (and accompanying programme of activities) of his project *The Drawing Room*. The work situated its participants within a 360° panorama of interactive video displays, confronting them with a sprawling digital landscape that (through gesture recognition and a hand-held controller) could be navigated in real-time; participants able to leave gestural marks (and other digital artefacts) within the terrain, expanding the project's universe<sup>49</sup>.

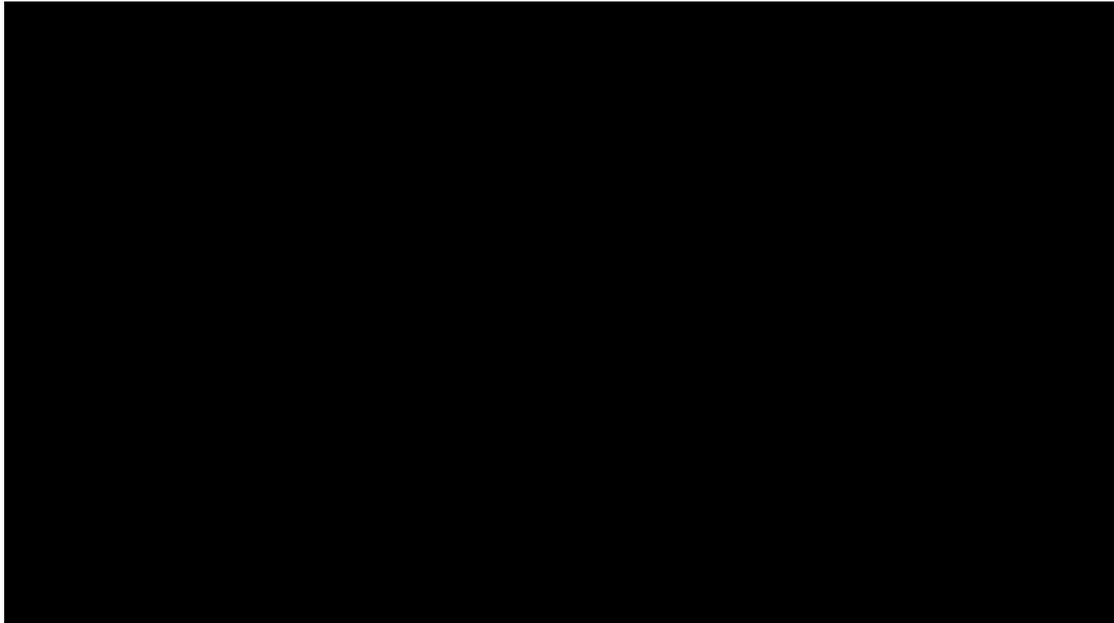
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<sup>49</sup> See: <http://www.fact.co.uk/projects/the-drawing-room.aspx>



Luc Courchesne | **The Drawing Room** – Society for Art and Technology [SAT], Montreal | 2013 (Fig 4.2)

Significantly however, this virtual environment was not merely accessible to a user through its portal in FACT's Liverpool building, but could also be accessed *simultaneously* by another participant via an identical 360° panorama of screens housed within Montreal's Society for Art and Technology [SAT]. Two users would find themselves interacting, conversing (via microphones and integrated speakers) and exploring a common virtual topography, sharing in this encounter despite a distance of over 3000 miles and a 5-hour time difference separating them. Each participant would also be visible to the other, perceived in real-time as a digitally scanned avatar seen floating through the virtual scenery.



Luc Courchesne | **The Drawing Room** – Society for Art and Technology [SAT], Montreal | 2013 (Fig 4.3)

As Courchesne writes in relation to his 360° panoramic work, it, ‘attempts to give form and substance to the idea of a multi layered reality, seamlessly blending its physical, augmented and virtual folds’ (Courchesne 2010). As such, we see the artist demonstrating the ways in which such forms of *telepresence* (as exemplified by this work) can affect a changed conception of space and place within the mind of the participant. With such technologically facilitated *transformations* of space being a central concern for this study, their implications (as revealed by Courchesne’s work) are interesting to consider.

As commented upon by numerous participants (in reviewing their experiences after leaving the space), whilst the gestural interfaces and feeling of self-directed navigation enabled a degree of immersion and *embodiment* within the virtual environment, it was the co-habitation of the space with another user that really enforced the feeling of one’s *presence*. The digital landscape, whilst visually compelling, was often noted to feel somehow *sterile* and conspicuously inauthentic (discernably lacking some component that would engender the feeling of a separate *reality*). However, when experiencing the space with another user, one’s own presence, a distinct awareness of oneself as existing within the environment, was suddenly snapped into a sharper focus. As a consequence, accompanying this newfound self identification within the virtual sphere, one’s spatial grounding within FACT’s building

was said to be progressively diminished; the greater the degree of interaction with another participant, the further the digital landscape became the basis of one's conceived reality.

Such a blurring of spatial boundaries (the walls of FACT and SAT becoming virtually entwined) had a corresponding influence upon one's conception of *time*. Whilst knowing that one's interactions were taking place with individuals in a distant timezone, the feeling of a common presence within this digital landscape seemed to (at least in part) detach participants from a recognition of this situation; 'now' for *us* being 'now' for *them* also. Local time (as well as local space) was thus obscured; the work's internal *reality* subsisting beyond a somatic comprehension of either. The means by which technologies of telepresence can generate such perceived spatio-temporal distortions (and the implications of this culturally) will be examined further within the fifth chapter of this study (with particular recourse to the writing of Paul Virilio).

In relation to the ambitions of this study, Courchesne's project is telling of several pertinent phenomena. Firstly, that the artwork (with its intrinsic lack of functional utility) has the capacity to call an audience's attention to the social and cultural implications of technological change. The work is not a utilitarian device (a *usefulness* that would negate this quality), rather it is a vehicle for confronting ideas. As such, with technologies as an ever-pervasive cultural influence, we are given an enhanced capacity to question their ramifications as an aspect of our contemporary circumstances. Placed within a gallery setting (such as FACT), audiences are primed to reflect upon an object's significance in ways that daily life does not often encourage. Furthermore, *The Drawing Room* project (and its subsequent appraisal by audiences) denotes the effect of interaction with another user as being instrumental in our inclinations toward regarding one's *presence* within a virtual setting. We contextualise ourselves in relation to such exchanges, the once arid and *abstracted* environment becoming imbued with personal significance as the stage upon which our encounter has been enabled. Ultimately, this work is indicative of a necessity to continually refine our discussions of space in light of its advancing mutability, questioning the liabilities endemic in such distortions and confronting the possibility of a future characterised by an eternal *placelessness*.

## 2. Human Futures

Just such a sustained investigation into our changing understandings of space and place was the core prerogative of *Human Futures: Shared Memories and Visions*, an international collaborative project (with FACT as its UK base) on which I worked closely with a number of participating artists and cultural institutions to creatively engage with these issues. As an outline of its focus and scope, the following is an introductory text<sup>50</sup> that I wrote for the project's launch in 2014:

...

As an international collaboration between cultural partners in Liverpool, Aarhus, Berlin, Vienna and Montreal, **Human Futures: Shared Memories and Visions** seeks to incite a process of re-evaluation in how we conceive our surroundings. Across the host cities, a series of newly commissioned cultural projects will invite citizens to participate in shared encounters; each offering a renewed conception of our environments and confronting the accelerating potential for communication and collaboration. Structured as a series of eight artist residencies, each hosted by a partner organisation, the idea of sharing and of the *exchange* is central to the project's philosophy, Canadian and European artists trading-places and opening up new platforms for dialogue on an international scale. In rethinking the connections between cities, artists will respond to their new urban environments and engage with local communities and concerns; each tackling a different model of space and re-imagining its capacity for shared experience. Sharing in; cognitive space, networked space, living space and urban space will all be explored, offering glimpses of impending realities and multiple embodiments of the future community.

With the escalating potentials of technology requiring new considerations of our ability to comprehend and engage with such spaces in our daily lives, this project sets out to forecast and interrogate the future terrains that will shape our experiences. Just as the fundamental 20th Century discourses upon the understanding of space were manifestations of the burgeoning potentials for new communication and personal locomotion; Human Futures establishes such dialogues as an on-going *necessity*. In revealing new geographies through the interconnectedness of formerly disparate locations, this project seeks to develop a renewed perspective, a new standpoint from which to regard our environments. It is

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<sup>50</sup> See: <http://www.humanfutures.info/about/>

in such comprehension of the changing ‘shape’ of space that we can affirm our relationship *with*, and affinity *to* our surroundings; and recognise the abilities for community building and collective action now being offered to us.

It is the artists’ function to support this recognition, creating dynamic platforms for a shared conception of space; and evaluating the implications that these new ways of thinking have for our view of the world and our position within it. Formats for presenting these artistic outcomes will include a Marketplace in Aarhus, a Projection Parcours in Montreal, an Exposition in Liverpool and a Human Futures Toolkit, which will provide strategies for stimulating creative sharing and collective identities for the future development of our cities. It is technology’s ability to re-contextualise our perceived position within space that demands such a renewed outlook, no longer enforced upon us, the structure of our surroundings is increasingly a consequence of our own design. The understanding of space, both past and present, maps out a path of fluid transition; one that we must retrace and learn from, as it flows into the shifting potentiality of our advancing horizons. Within this, the role of the artist is refocused, yet in a way that is somehow familiar, as the observer of what *is* and the interrogator of what *ought to be*; our future is no longer a circumstantial imposition, but a choice.

...

This project generated a large quantity of artistic outcomes (that can be reviewed here <http://www.humanfutures.info/projects/>) and also the opportunity to engage in a sustained dialogue with artists and partner organisations in the service of this study.

In an interview I conducted with Aram Bartholl (at FACT, Liverpool) in October of 2015<sup>51</sup>, I began by asking the artist about his on-going project *KillYourPhone*<sup>52</sup>, a series of DIY workshops that Bartholl has been running internationally (including at FACT) since 2013. The drop-in workshops invite participants to construct metallic pouches for their mobile devices, the pouch’s material creating a ‘Faraday Cage’ that blocks all incoming and outgoing signals. As Bartholl commented:

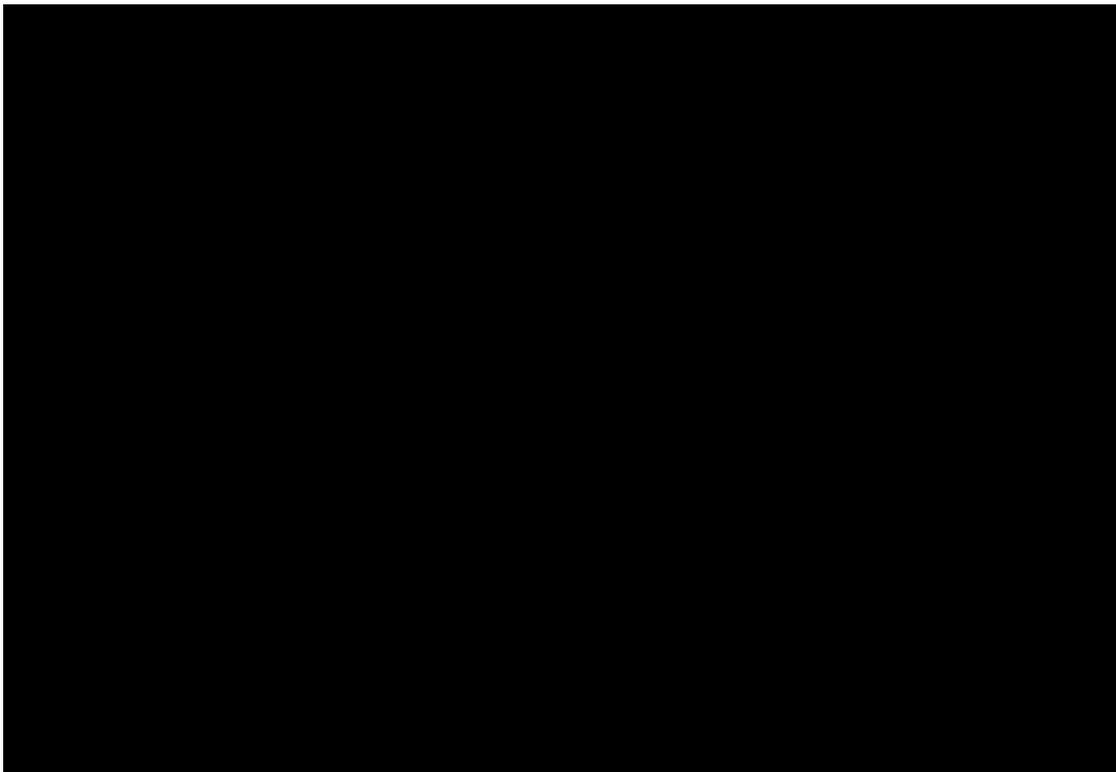
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<sup>51</sup> Video of this interview can be accessed here: <http://www.humanfutures.info/aram-bartholl/>

<sup>52</sup> See this project’s dedicated website at: <http://killyourphone.com>

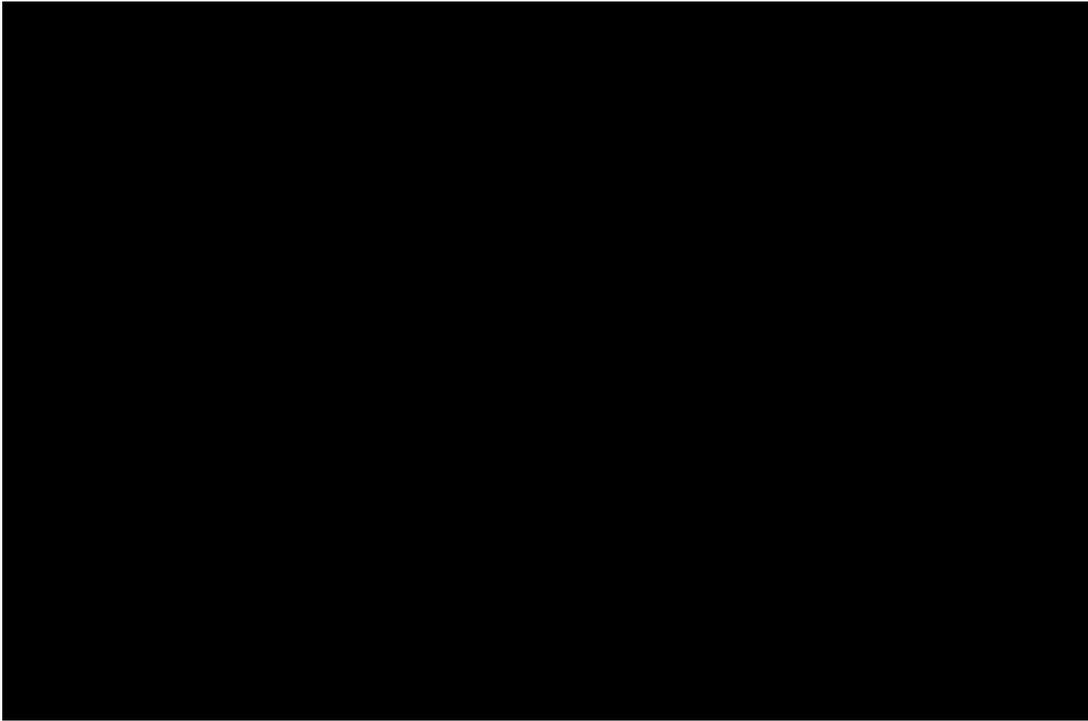
The format of a workshop, I think, is very intriguing, how you engage with people. You sit on a table and you work with your hands, crafting these objects [...] while you talk about these questions of surveillance [and] privacy – instead of just buying this product off the shelf or off some website.

(Bartholl 2015)



Aram Bartholl | **KillYourPhone** – workshop | 2014 (Fig 4.4)

Again, as with Courchesne’s project discussed earlier, we can see the context of an artistic project as being one that emboldens a questioning stance on behalf of technology users. The format of Bartholl’s workshops encourage active discussion and critique of technology’s increasing interconnectedness and ubiquity; indeed such events would not be feasible unless the vast majority of attendees were in constant possession of data-enabled mobile devices. In many ways, this project is illustrative of Bartholl’s artistic preoccupations as a whole, much of his work focused upon *grounding* digital information in a specific physical location, or taking digital artefacts (such as his *Google Maps* pins) and constructing them as material forms in a physical site.



Aram Bartholl | **Map** – public installation | 2006-2010 (Fig 4.5)

This is perhaps best expressed by the artist's most publicised project, the *DeadDrops*<sup>53</sup> series, in which Bartholl embeds physical media, USB keys, CD drives etc., directly into the urban landscape, in doing so, he tethers digital information intimately to a singular point in physical space. As I moved our discussion to this project, Bartholl stated:

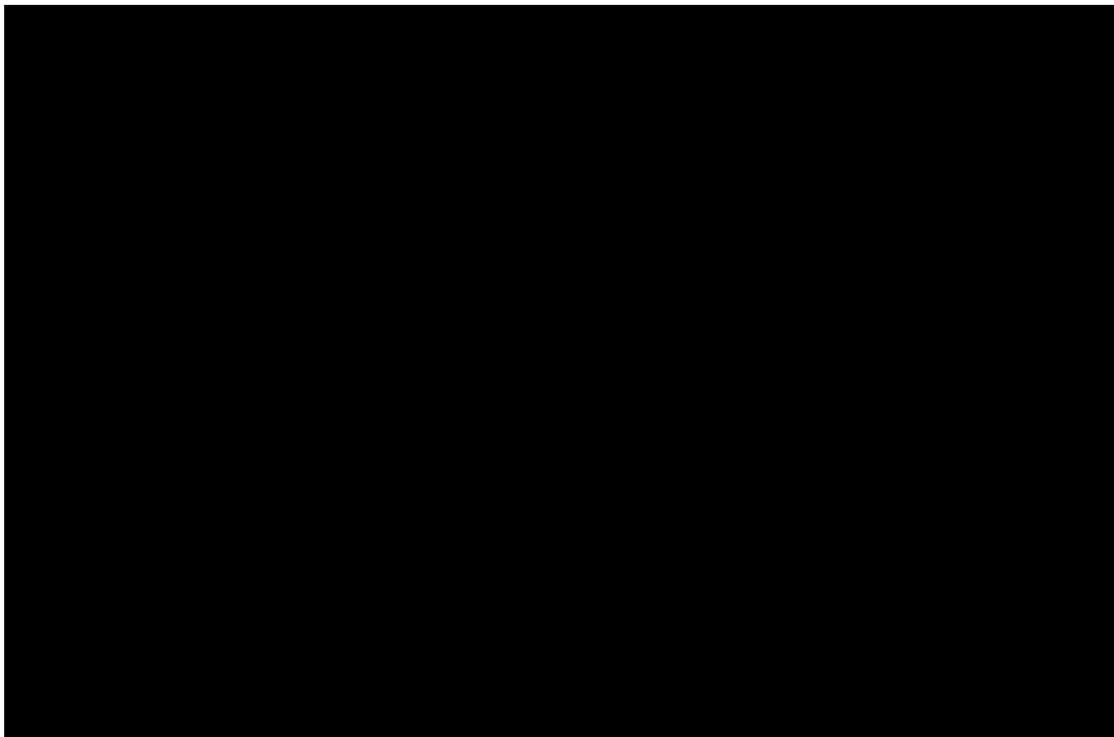
It makes it very physical in a way [...] the gesture of, you take your laptop and you connect to the building, and the whole building becomes the drive and it's the physical city. Its not in the cloud, it not on some server, its literally cemented, data is only here and its in the wall. I think that's a very important picture to understand what happens on the other side, that whilst we still have hard drives on our machines [...] in a couple of years this will be gone, its just connected, its just going to be on the server.

(Bartholl 2015)

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<sup>53</sup> See this project's dedicated website at: <http://deaddrops.com>

In such a way, Bartholl's work can be seen as a direct reaction against the encroaching interconnectedness of digital information, the artist imposing physical *distance* between digital objects and imbuing them with the spatial and material properties of a concrete form. Asking questions of 'how we live today [and] what does it do to us' (2015), Bartholl's projects reflect a desire to examine technological progression by curtailing its advancing capacities, constituting a physical foundation for the digital object that renders it more comprehensible to human perceptual ratios. Such a methodology, of exploring technology's ability to distort space by intentionally impeding its ability to do so was revealingly prevalent among many of the artists work for the *Human Futures* project, a will to reclaim one's somatic understanding of space in direct conflict to the trajectory of technological change.



Aram Bartholl | **DeadDrops** – public intervention | 2010-2012 (Fig 4.6)

For example, Montréal-based artist Sébastien Pierre embarked upon a similar line of technological abridgement with his project *Invisible Islands*, creating sheltered *cloisters* of digital information accessible at only certain locations within an urban environment. In common with Bartholl, the artist expresses anxieties over the privacy of personal information in the digital age, evoking Snowden's NSA revelations as something of a social context for his work. In summary of the project, Pierre writes:

Based on the simple idea of tying information to the physical space, Invisible Islands looks at how citizens can use inexpensive hardware and wireless networks to create information islands that allow us to openly share information while preserving privacy.

Disconnected from the Internet, the information available in each Island is only access through QR codes displayed in the public space, thus creating a naturally sheltered medium for the community to share and interact in the public space.

(Pierre 2014)

When I questioned the artist on his perceived imperative for the *isolation* of information from internet-enabled accessibility, Pierre noted its transparency in our daylily lives (due to its lack of material corporeality) and the importance of revealing this as an act of social disclosure, stating that:

The digital space is becoming more and more embedded in our everyday life. Largely unseen, because it has no physical embodiment, it is growing day by day: more data is being produced and collected, more nodes are added to the Internet and cellular networks. With mobile devices and GPS, we've created bridges between the physical and the virtual. I find these points of contact fascinating, because they act as portals between both worlds and blur the border between the experiential and the digital.

(Pierre 2014)

In discussing this with the artist during the 2014 Media Architecture Biennial (MAB) in Aarhus, Denmark<sup>54</sup>, I asked about the contemporary significance (as he saw it) of anchoring digital information to defined spatial localities, Pierre claiming this as a point of cultural urgency, revealing the growing openness of one's personal data and its vulnerability to governmental exploitation.

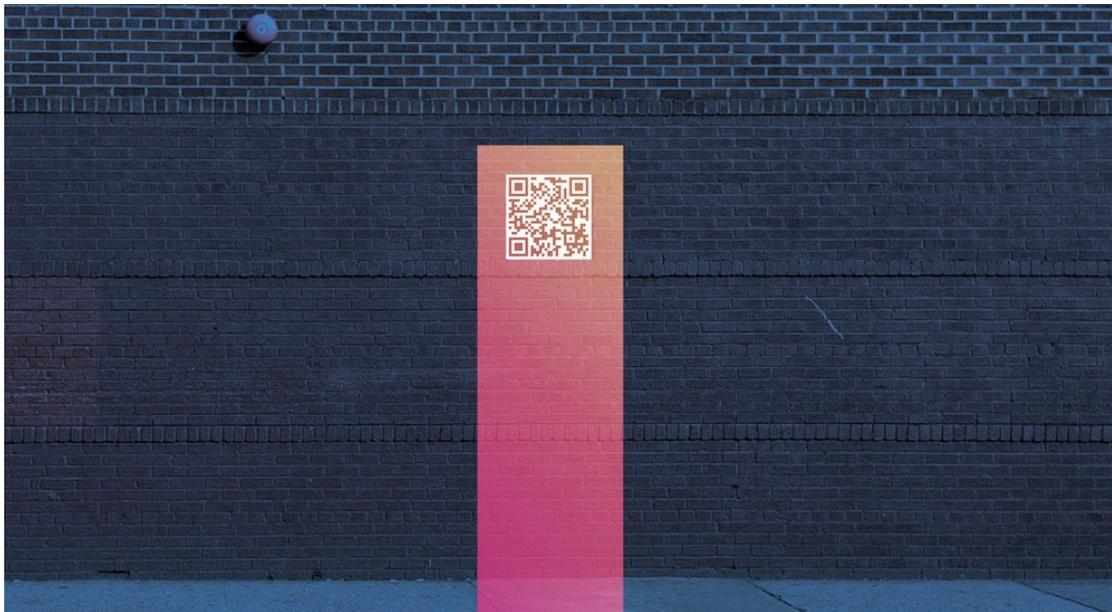
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<sup>54</sup> Video of this interview can be accessed here: <http://www.humanfutures.info/sebastien-pierre/>

So this is a context of a, almost like a crisis context, that was one of the inspirations for the project [...] But what happens if you tie information to a specific place? What happens if to access information you have to go in the specific area where the network is available?

(Pierre 2014)

Consequently, Pierre regards the urban environment as one in which digital information can be safely secreted, accessed and shared, beyond the reach of government agencies. A perceived misapprehension here (one that was also noted during my interview with Bartholl) is that people seem to regard the online space as intrinsically safe and secure (perhaps due to its experiences taking place within our domestic environments and through our personal devices), whilst the urban landscape is seen as one of more considerable threat. Both Pierre and Bartholl suggest that this is no longer the case, that the risks posed to us by the misuse of our personal data have come to outweigh the more immediate, physical dangers that can be encountered within the city.



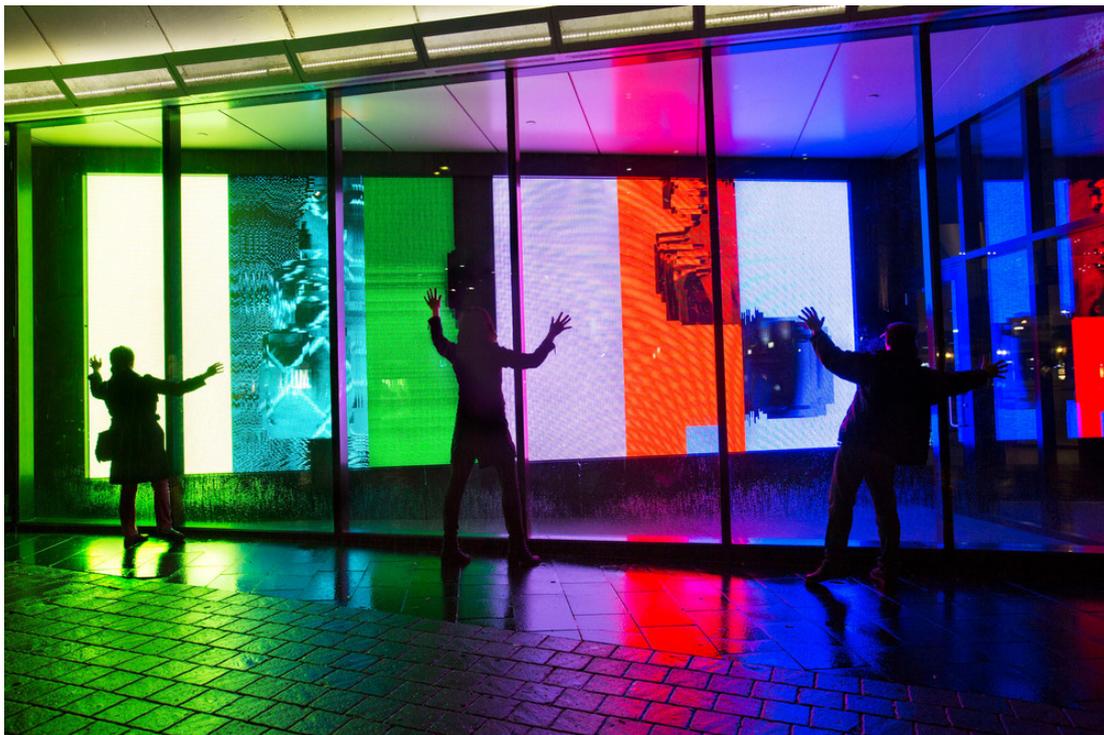
Sébastien Pierre | **Invisible Islands** – visualisation | 2014 (Fig 4.7)

Whilst artists such as Bartholl and Pierre note the cultural and political liabilities of technologies as an increasingly dominant force in our contemporary societies, others within the Human Futures project, such as Daniel Iregui (also known as *Irregular*), look more closely at the impacts of technological

change (and its spatial obfuscations) upon the *individual* and their ability to derive meaning from interactions with the world. Iregui remarks upon a progressive inability to *disconnect* from technology and the omnipresent links that it structures between us and our various interactions (with people and places) in daily life. Reflecting upon his 2015 work *End of Broadcast*, produced for the Human Futures Projection Parcours in Montreal, Iregui writes:

We are constantly bombarded with images and information, surrounded by media and hyper-connected to the world. Everything we see and hear remains stored in our memory, affecting it in countless ways. *End of Broadcast* is an interactive installation representing a brief moment of disconnection, where the only way of staying connected is through memories.

(Iregui 2015)



Daniel Iregui (Irregular) | **End of Broadcast** – interactive video installation | 2015 (Fig 4.8)

This interactive video installation required the recognition of a participant's movements in front of a screen to reveal video fragments, like snapshots of memories, that would fade away without this direct user input. As such, the work considered the extent to which our perspectives of the world are coming

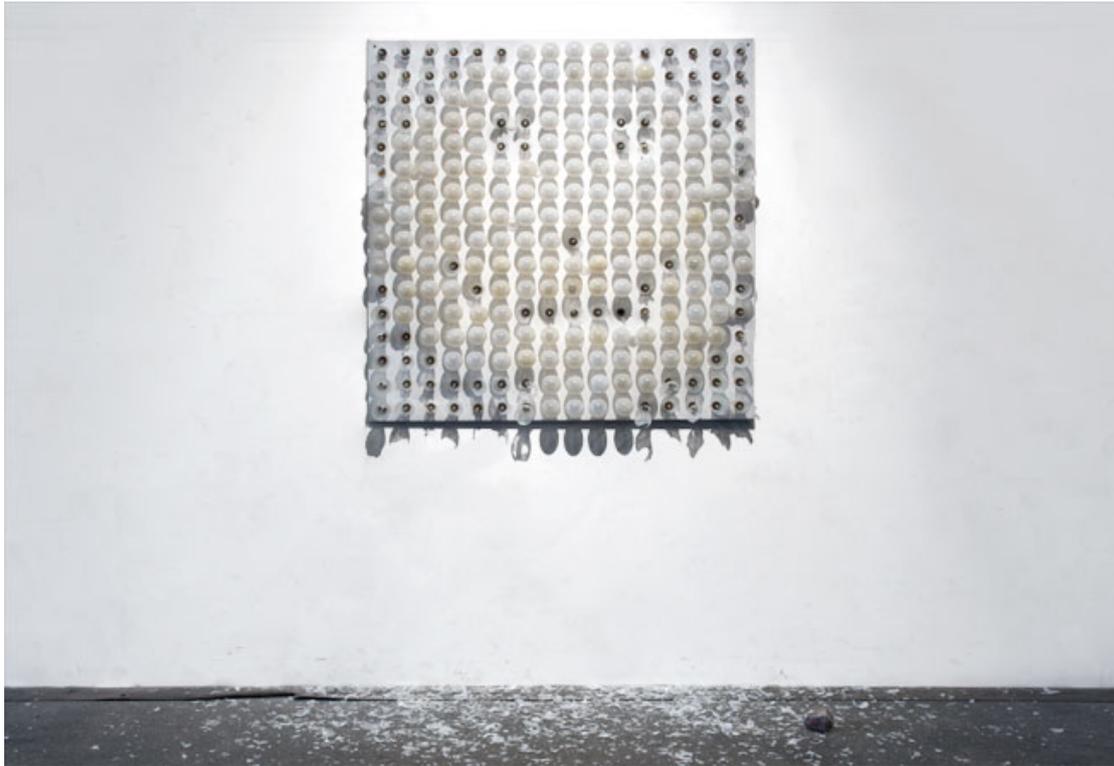
to be a result of interface and technological mediation, the navigation of daily life distilled into an interactive, electronic experience. Discussing this with Iregui in November 2015 (again at FACT), the artist reflected that:

[...] we are so overwhelmed with this information and data that even if you go to your house you are just 'docked' to something else. So I started to work a bit more on this notion of overwhelming connections and information and data, emails, WhatsApp and all this - things that you just have to deal with and you are basically living in the world, just keeping up to date with all this, and you are missing out on the real things that are happening.

(Iregui 2015)

For Iregui then, the sheer volume of digital content and mediums of communication that we are presently confronted with is enough to sufficiently distract (and necessarily detach) us from meaningful first-hand experiences. The amenities that forms of digital connection provide us are many, however, for Iregui, these lack some substantive authenticity when compared to a physical encounter. A return to a more involved relationship with the material world is thus advocated, once again, we see an artist working with technology as a means to explicate its potential detriments within our lived experience.

Whilst many of the Human Futures artists worked with technology as a self-reflexive medium in just such a way, others, such as Michel de Broin, employed non-digital materials, satirising forms of digital iconography. His performative sculptural work *Smashy Face* (exhibited as part of Human Futures at the 2014 MAB) takes the form of a pixelated grid, the common medium of technological interface, and builds it in physical space from household light bulbs, with the artist smashing these bulbs with a rock (in front of an audience), the work reflects the ongoing dynamism and potency of physical objects.



Michel de Broin | **Smashy Face** – performative sculpture, MAB 2014 | 2014 (Fig 4.9)

Appearing as some dystopian fairground sign, or a dark rendering of the ubiquitous mobile phone ‘emoji’, this piece (particularly within the context of a media arts festival) can be seen to critique the unthinking impulses toward technological adoption, de Broin writing of the work:

Placed on the wall in the form of a 16 x 16 grid, 256 incandescent light bulbs are used as a canvas for a Stone Age inspired performance. I used a cobblestone taken from a Berlin road as a tool to draw a face by smashing select light bulbs on the grid. The installation will need no external power to smile. [...] Returning to analog forms of image making—but making wry reference to binary expression with the bit-like 16 x 16 grid—each light bulb smashed represents an exploded pixel here. The work stands in stark contrast to the embellished technological works, to suggest instead, that there remains traction in concise gestures and raw materials.

(de Broin 2014)

Across the range of works and ideas brought forth during the events of *Human Futures*, a number of consistent perspectives and preoccupations can be identified that are applicable to the themes of this study. In addition to the projects explored above; the work of Darsha Hewitt<sup>55</sup> and Sam Meech<sup>56</sup> involved the adoption of outmoded and obsolete technologies, employed in an educative capacity to re-think the technological landscape of today, Bengt Sjölen's<sup>57</sup> *Little Black Book of Wireless*, once opened, stole information from an audience member's mobile phone (the data then erased once the book was closed), and Tobias Ebsen<sup>58</sup> produced interactive light and sounds works within public space, with digital interfaces used to connect a physical input (from a spectator) with a physical output (as an audio-visual response).

We see artists seeking to reveal the inner workings of otherwise inscrutable technological systems, exposing these to an audience and assessing their implications. The prevalence with which artists within this project sought to *constrict* technological functioning is interesting to consider; with the rationale of *Human Futures* based upon gaining a renewed conception of space and place in our contemporary situation, technology's capacities are evidently seen as a *barrier* to this knowledge in some key regard. The *partitioning* of information (as expressed most clearly in the works of Bartholl and Pierre), imposing physical constraints upon the digital object, is telling of a desire to reclaim some lost conception of *placeness*, tethering the digital to a material site; an implication here, that it is only within such defined spatial conditions that we can truly apprehend it.

### 3. Site-based installation

Developments in my own artistic practice [see appendix 1.] have gradually led to a form of site-based working, creating temporary interventions into specific locations that in some way reflect or respond to their environments; they exist for a defined period of time and are then gone forever. As such, these works may be thought of as in some ways antithetical to the spatio-temporal elasticity of technologically mediated experience, existing uniquely at a fixed point in space and within a narrow window of time.

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<sup>55</sup> See: <http://www.humanfutures.info/darsha-hewitt/>

<sup>56</sup> See: <http://www.humanfutures.info/sam-meech/>

<sup>57</sup> See: <http://www.humanfutures.info/bengt-sjolen-with-weise-7/>

<sup>58</sup> See: <http://www.humanfutures.info/tobias-ebsen/>

In early 2013 I became the first recipient of The Royal British Society of Sculptors' *Sculpture Shock*<sup>59</sup> award and residency, tasked with producing a series of works for public exhibition within *The Vaults*, a sprawling network of disused railway tunnels beneath London's Waterloo station. The nature of this space dictated that audiences would have to venture underground (through a relatively inhospitable environment) in order to encounter the work; such a *journey*, becoming fundamental to the exhibition's encounter. As Christopher Williams commented in an article for *The Telegraph* covering the exhibition:

The location is not for the unadventurous contemporary art aficionado. Its entrance is at the unglamorous end of Waterloo station, under the tracks, which is normally used as a (council-approved) practice area for graffiti artists and as meeting point for street drinkers. Outside the exhibition, the tunnel air has the aroma and sense of threat you would expect of any such abandoned urban environment.

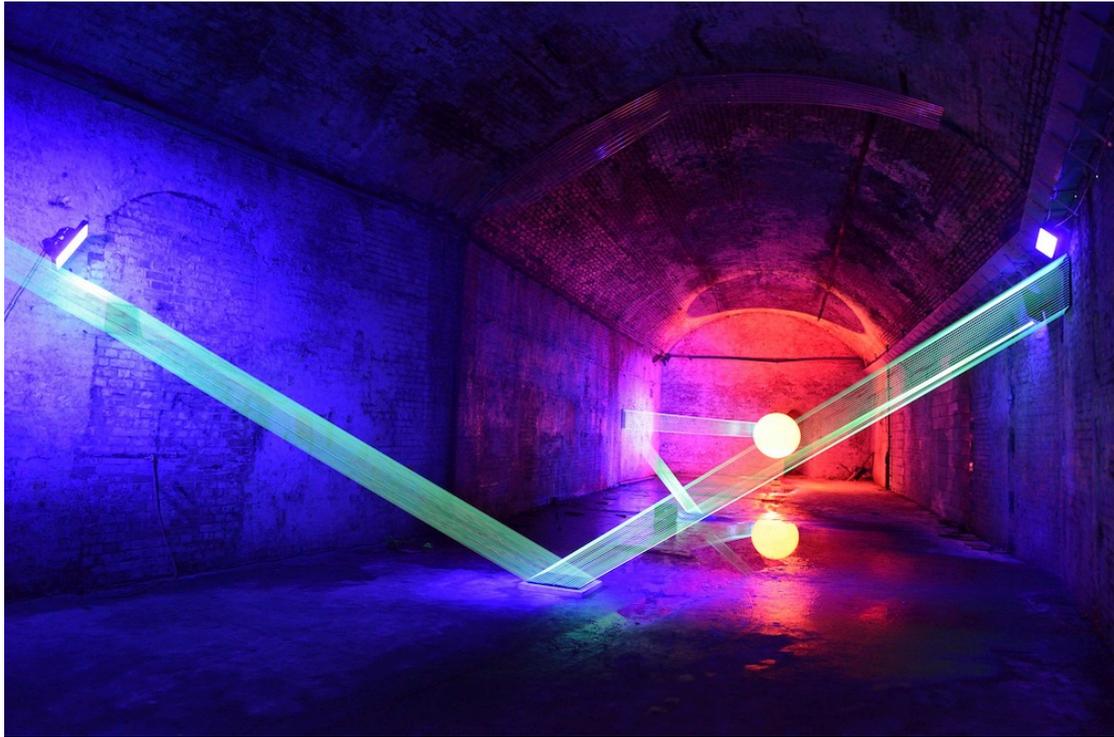
Inside and underground, however, the filth and funk of the outside world are quickly forgotten.<sup>60</sup>

My rationale for the works produced within this site was that we travel into subterranean places (like a mine or a tomb) to discover something precious and it is in the darkness of such environments, cut-off from the surface and the sun, that *light* is at its most valuable. Producing a series of light-based installations that guided audiences (lighting their way) through the darkened environment, the site-specific works simultaneously reflected the tunnel's architecture and permitted its encounter.

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<sup>59</sup> See: <http://sculptureshock.rbs.org.uk/subterranean>

<sup>60</sup> See: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/10004333/Sculpture-Shock-Subterranean-art-from-David-Ogle.html>



David Ogle | **08019** – light installation, London | 2013 (Fig 4.10)

Reflecting upon her experiences of the (above) work, Sarah Kent (art critic and former Director of London's ICA) writes:

The main vault was bathed in red, blue and purple light that dramatised the space. It seemed to hold its breath like a stage awaiting a theatrical event; beamed along clusters of fine wire, shafts of green light sliced through the space from ceiling to floor. They hit their target with the precision of the celestial beams that impregnate the Virgin Mary in paintings of the Annunciation.

Hanging low in the distance, meanwhile, a weather balloon glowed orange. Reflected in a puddle of water, it was reminiscent of the sun setting over a lake and draining the light from the sky as it sank towards the horizon. Memories of landscape and the nuances of natural light opened one's mind to the wider world beyond this sunless place.

(Kent 2016, p.44)

Audiences feedback from this exhibition consistently recalled the value individuals derived from the self-directed exploration of this subterranean environment, the surmounting of its hostile conditions and the abrupt confrontations with the artwork; in such a way, it may be argued that the *barriers* imposed by the exhibition's location (and the personal significance gleaned from overcoming them) were fundamental to its experiential merits.

Site-specific work of this kind, within unusual, *non-art* settings, can reveal an interesting tension between a space's previous utility function and its new guise as an exhibition environment. The tunnels were no longer a functional part of the rail network, but nor were they a gallery, the space becomes challenging to classify, enabling encounters outside of day-to-day experience and encouraging audiences to (on some level) think differently about the location they're exploring. Within this, the significance of site is compounded, audiences knowing that their experience is grounded within these specific surroundings; meaning and value being derived from this scarcity.

Following this exhibition, and in consideration of how its uncustomary setting and the difficulties of its exploration were thought to add value to its encounter, I held a subsequent exhibition of site-based work (entitled *In Another Light*) in a remote rural location, one that was only accessible at night.

A series of exploratory installations were constructed amongst the grounds of Croft Castle (a National Trust property in rural Herefordshire), the site was opened to audiences after dark, allowing them to freely explore the grounds and stumble across the various artworks (amongst its woodland areas, within several out-buildings and one work suspended in the distance to the far side of the castle's lake).



David Ogle | **Over the Lake** – light installation, Herefordshire | 2014 (Fig 4.11)

Activating after dark, an 18ft disc (lit from behind by powerful floodlighting) sent a beam of blue light across the lake's waters, visually mapping the distance to the far shore. Like the gradual arrivals and departures of light in nature, this work only existed within certain hours, connecting it to the cycle of the living landscape it was surrounded by. Audiences, venturing out into this location after the sun had set (this itself an uncommon occurrence for the viewing of art) knew that their experience was again tied to this specific window of time, inseparable from their surroundings and encompassing all of the shifting environmental activity within this remote setting.

I consider such exhibition projects to be defined by a level of disconnection and *inaccessibility*, the value of experiencing them stemming from the summation of the journey that must be undertaken for their encounter. Like many of the project's considered within this chapter, these works (particularly in relation to their role in this study) are a reaction against the *placelessness* of digital experience, providing a medium through which to connect with a physical environment and reorient oneself against this fixed spatial horizon<sup>61</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup> Further information of past installation projects can be accessed here: <http://www.davidogle.co.uk/installation>

#### 4. Loomings

In 2014 (through the Art's Council's *Grants for the Arts*) I received project funding to create a new strand of installation work, the rationale for this project was informed (in part) by the trajectory of previous works (such as those that have just been considered) but with a significant difference; that these works would be so tied to a remote (and narrow) window of space and time that they would never be seen by audiences. Captured through video and photography (with such outcomes presented as documentary material), these recordings would be all that remained of the project's happenings. As I described in an interview with WIRED magazine, following the completion of the project's first phase:

They're kind of postcards of something that happened in this sort of remote location in this very specific place in this very specific moment of time,"

"It's just a way of capturing something that's very, very brief."<sup>62</sup>

This (now on-going) series of work is entitled *Loomings*, a reference to the first chapter title of Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) in which the narrator (Ishmael) describes his feelings of being 'pulled' towards the wilderness; wanting to leave behind the constraints and domesticity of the city. The era of *Romanticism* (of which Melville's novel is archetypal) is also integral to the project's conceptual aims, depicting an idealised view of the natural landscape and rejecting the technological *interconnectedness* of things (as outlined earlier) in a similar fashion to the ways in which the Romantic Movement was (in part) a reaction against the industrial revolution.

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<sup>62</sup> This interview can be accessed here: <https://www.wired.com/2016/02/alien-landscapes-made-earth-smoke-bombs-lasers>



David Ogle | **Ray** – video installation, Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre | 2016 (Fig 4.12)

The image above (taken from the project's first exhibition at *Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre* in early 2016) shows the installation of one of the project's video works, *Ray*. Within this work, a cloud of blue smoke emerges from an underground cavern, billowing around a natural ravine and revealing the movements of the wind as it moves through the landscape. As the smoke reaches the height of the ravine, the sun emerges from behind overhead clouds and beams down into the cavern, the smoke revealing defined rays of light cutting down onto the forest floor.

The work captures (through high-resolution video) this elusive event, as the sun appears at the perfect moment; enabling viewers to witness this encounter that occurred out in a remote place for a single, specific duration of time.

It may be argued, that capturing such events (digitally) and relaying them to audiences outside of their spatial origins is a negation of the *placeness* sought by the installation works described earlier. Whilst it is stressed in all interpretive material (during exhibitions of this work) that the video and photography are purely documentation (the authentic *artwork* having only existed for a brief time) this remains a challenge to the project's integrity.

Such deficiencies in the project are themselves however interesting to consider, illustrative of the liabilities manifest by technological reproduction (as will be explored further in chapter four). An event is plucked from its moorings to a specific point in space and time, rather than audiences crossing a distance to encounter it, this expanse is collapsed; time is caught in a loop, recycling endlessly, hour after hour on the walls of the gallery space.

#### **IV. Interface**

With regards to the convergence of formerly discrepant media (and the encounters they permit) it is necessary to look again at the writing of Friedrich Kittler. Kittler remarks upon the elastic mutability of fibre optic networks to transmit any form of media (text, image, audio, video, as well as emerging compounds and hybrids of these), eroding the perceivable distinctions between all sensory mediums. As he writes in the introduction to *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999):

**Optical fiber networks.** People will be hooked to an information channel that can be used for any medium—for the first time in history, or for its end. Once movies and music, phone calls and texts reach households via optical fiber cables, the formerly distinct media of television, radio, telephone, and mail converge, standardized by transmission frequencies and bit format. The optoelectronic channel in particular will be immune to disturbances that might randomize the pretty bit patterns behind the images and sounds.

(Kittler 1999, p.1)

Whilst the *old* media (television, radio etc.) were intimately tied to the phenomena that they were designed to capture and transmit (*analogue* referring to a circuit or device having an output that is proportional to its input, i.e. that is *analogous*), digital information is regarded by Kittler of being of an entirely different nature. Kittler instead suggests that digital technology renders the perceptual-aesthetic dimension of media as merely ‘eyewash’ (p.1), that its perceived comprehension is a relic of a now obsolete anthropocentric view of media and that digital technology produces images that are without

any necessary or intrinsic orientation whatsoever to human perceptual ratios. To Kittler, the digital object is ‘forgery incarnate’ (2001, p.72), it is a deceptive illusion created by information masquerading as image and stripping aesthetics “of any intrinsic correlation with the human perceptual experience” (Hansen 2004, p.73). As Kittler writes:

In contrast to the semi-analogue medium of television, not only the horizontal lines but also the vertical columns [of the computer image] are resolved into basic units. The mass of these so-called “pixels” forms a two-dimensional matrix that assigns each individual point of the image a certain mixture of the three base colours: red, green and blue. The discrete or digital nature of both the geometric coordinates and their chromatic values makes possible the magical artifice that separates computer graphics from film and television. Now, for the first time in the history of optical media, it is possible to address a single pixel in the 849<sup>th</sup> row 720<sup>th</sup> column directly without having to run through everything before and after it. The computer image is thus [...] forgery incarnate. It deceives the eye [...] with the illusion or image of an image, while in truth the mass of pixels, because of its thorough addressability, proves to be structured more like a text composed entirely of individual letters.

(Kittler 2001, p.72)

Kittler thus argues that a computer’s graphical interface bears no visual correlation to the object it is representing, pixels on a screen (whilst appearing to depict an image) being in reality a flat plane of RGB values that bear no connection to that which is depicted. As such, the links between reality and image (object) are obscured, the viewer unable to ascertain the immaterial connection between these two states. Whilst digital images *can* obviously be perceived as recognisable forms, Hansen questions the status of this perception, asking: “Does the correlation between imaging and human perception demarcate something intrinsic about information itself, namely, its orientation to the communicational purposes of human beings? Or is it simply a hangover of a soon-to-be-obsolescent technical system?” (Hansen 2004, p.73) Kittler’s writing would clearly assert the latter to be the case.

Both Hansen and Kittler view the digital image as a product of human cognition, but whilst Kittler asserts that the image is 'a purely arbitrary function of algorithmic processing' that denies the viewer the reality of the computer's functioning, Hansen suggests that our perception of the on-screen object demonstrates the human being's innate ability to perceive a form of encoded information and assign a meaning to it. These two positions therefore demonstrate opposing views of dominance, the human mind over the *machine's* and vice versa. Information encoded in a visual form can reveal our patterning seeking nature (as Hansen argues) but also the susceptibility to deception that this produces (as Kittler would state), the flickering image on the screen either viewed as a confirmation of our cognitive abilities or a meaningless light show of graphical values fed out by a technology of cold indifference.

In confronting the historical developments of technology's progression, Kittler identifies a fundamental stage, the point at which technology was empowered to manipulate what is perhaps our most crucial dimension for self-identification; *time*.

What phonographs and cinematographs, whose names not coincidentally derive from writing, were able to store was time: time as a mixture of audio frequencies in the acoustic realm and as the movement of single-image sequences in the optical. Time determines the limit of all art, which first has to arrest the daily data flow in order to turn it into images or signs. What is called style in art is merely the switchboard of these scannings and selections.

(Kittler 1999, p.3)

The previously durational phenomena, tied to its occurrence at a specific moment, could now be plucked from its point of happening (on a linear historical timeline) and re-enacted at any point in the present or future. That which was once lost to history could be brought skidding into present time, temporal distance (as well as spatial distance, with the advent of mobile storage mediums) collapsing around it; a perceptual homogenisation of time itself.

At the confluence of the ideas set forth by Kittler and Virilio a perhaps interesting conception of our technological landscape may be proposed. For Virilio, we are, as a society, increasingly moving into a world dominated by the perspective of 'Real Time', a world that has no past or history, merely a continuous ever-present, a world existing only in the *now*. One's existence at a singular point in space and time becomes progressively indeterminate, no fixed horizon to steady ourselves against and no distances with which to cross to in order to derive meaning (and value) from our encounters. Factor into this Kittler's assertions that the digitally presented image is of a fundamentally illusory (inauthentic) and deceptive essence, detached in a crucial sense from the reality it purports to convey. We are thus greeted by a cultural condition in which, incrementally, the world may be becoming further and further beyond one's grasp, opaque and mystifying, whilst simultaneously, we are offered a distorted digital facsimile, a *fiction*, to replace our lost capacity to conceive of the *real*.

Such circumstances can be characterised by the abolition of distance, in confronting them, we are forced to interrogate our values in order that we can construe a more meaningful way to live in the world. In assessment of this, we may propose that *the aura* has become more than just an imperative for the art object, but a vital and dwindling light for our contemporary societies as a whole, anchoring us to a world that is spinning out of control; all that is required now is the *resolve* to herald its return.

Like the earthworks of Robert Smithson considered earlier in this chapter and the examples of artistic projects undertaken in conjunction with this study, let us now reflect upon another recent project and the ways in which it presents the very *antithesis* of technology's eradication of distance; in this case Christo's *The Floating Piers* (2016).



Christo | **The Floating Piers** – Lake Iseo, Italy | 2016 (Fig 4.13)

Opening on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June 2016 (before its dismantling began 16 days later on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July) this vast installation consisted of 100,000 square meters of yellow fabric (blanketing a 3 kilometre walkway) supported by a modular floating dock system of 220,000 polyethylene cubes. Constructed within Lake Iseo near Brescia (within Italy's Lombardy region) the fabric created a walkable surface across the lake's waters, connecting Sulzano, Monte Isola and the island of San Paolo.

In confronting this work, we may conclude that in their very essence, its linear forms describe a *distance*, revealing it to a spectator (or *participant*) in ways that would be difficult to conceive of in the work's absence. We may even suggest that Christo calculatedly *created* the defined phenomenon of a distance across Lake Iseo's surface, a road to be travelled and a journey to undertake. From the vantage point of the aerial photograph above, we see the installation as a drawing through space, describing

with line and form the physical expanse that exists between points in the landscape, in much the same way as Mel Bochner's measurement works of the late 1960's described (and in doing so revealed) the architecture of the gallery space.

Further, the work is an incitement to traverse this distance (under one's own power) striding the previously terraqueous expanse under the buoyancy of the artist's intervention. Unlike the previously disconnected locations that become entwined by technologies, Christo's work does not *obscure* distance but *proclaim* it, requiring a participant's physical undertakings and sanctioning the somatic *nearness* that this instills. Sunlight bathes the brightly coloured fabric, leaving it warm; the walkway gently undulates with the swelling waters, as though the work itself is breathing beneath one's feet.

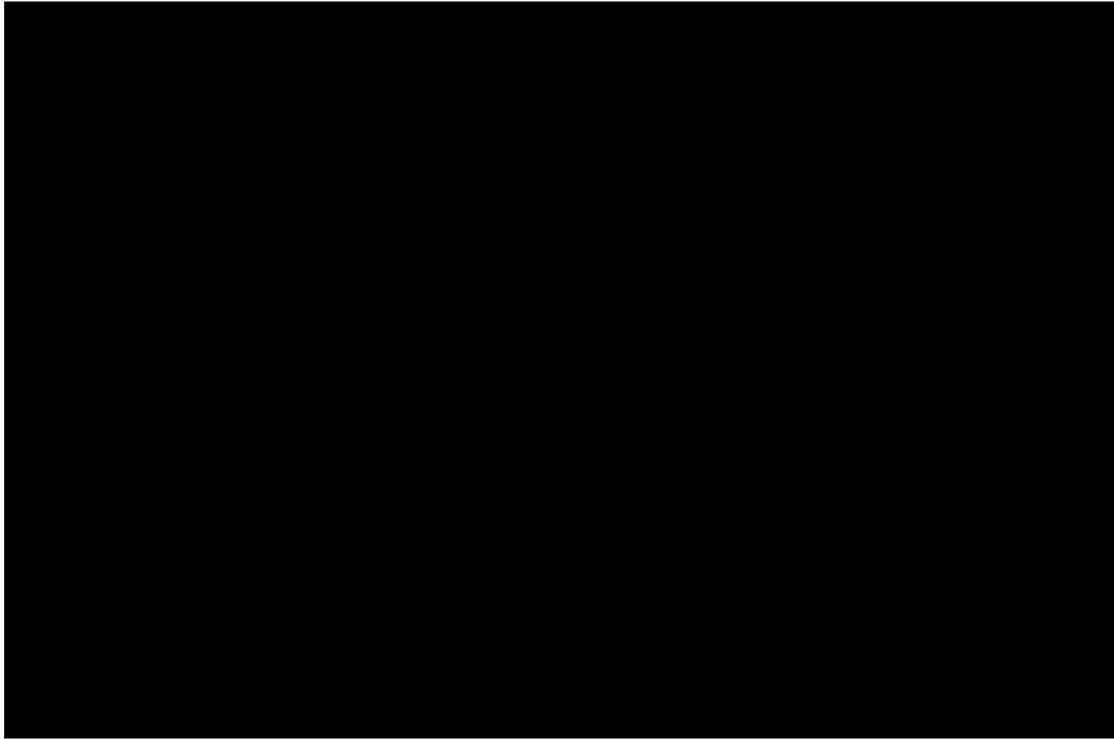
'The project, he said, "is all this" — the piers, the lake, the mountains, "with the sun, the rain, the wind, it's part of the physicality of the project, you have to live it'<sup>63</sup>.

Both physically and emotionally, the work is a connection to the landscape, encompassing all environmental occurrences that reveal themselves during the moments of its encounter. There is no safety fence, Christo stating that as soon as such a parapet is installed, the sensation of walking on water is lost. Participants travel out into the water, light and air temperature gradually shifting with the passage of time as they travel the linear path to the distant island. All is in focus; all is absorbed and assimilated by the sensory apparatus of the human body. We are confronted by a volume of distance as an objectified form, knowing it intimately in relation to the scale of our own bodies and gently drawn toward it terminus on the far horizon.

This is a work conceived for a specific site and existing within a specific window of time, a manifestation of *placeness*, its encounter living on in the memories of those who confronted it and its value a derivation of its remoteness and scarcity (across both spatial and temporal distance). It is a work that enables us to conceive space in new ways, or perhaps in *old* ways to which we have become unaccustomed; a vestige of our nomadic ancestry still longing for a forgotten frontier. We journey outwards, and watch the deepening azure of the waters beneath us as we move farther from the shore.

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<sup>63</sup> This quote, from a *New York Times* article covering the project, can be accessed here: [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/17/arts/design/christos-newest-project-walking-on-water.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/17/arts/design/christos-newest-project-walking-on-water.html?_r=0)



Christo | **The Floating Piers** – Lake Iseo, Italy | 2016 (Fig 4.14)

The enhanced significance of the art object, and crucially of its auric nature, for our contemporary situation will be explored further within the following conclusion to this study.

## CONCLUSION

As we begin to draw conclusions from this study as a whole, let us first return to the image that we were left with at the close of the final chapter; the longings felt by a wayfaring species and their pull to a far off horizon. The understanding we have of our environments and the significance we attribute to the crossing of distances may point towards something innate; a vestigial remnant of our ancestor's nomadic impulses that still underpins our attachment to the landscape. In 1993, a study by artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid (1997) sought to reveal the artistic preferences of people across ten different countries around the world. An overwhelming cross-cultural consensus emerged, from participants in countries as disparate as Kenya and Iceland, all gravitating towards common imagery that they found to be most compelling. Rejecting abstraction, these participants universally favoured imagery of landscapes dominated by blue, with trees and open-areas, human figures and animals. Often very dissimilar from the participant's native environment, this study revealed a common perception of an azure paradise, one hard-wired into our innermost instincts. As Dennis Dutton writes:

The emotions felt by our distant ancestors towards advantageous landscapes are of little use to us today, since we are no longer nomadic hunters who survive off the land. Nevertheless, since we still have the souls of those ancient nomads, these emotions can flood into modern minds with surprising and unexpected intensity. People who have spent their lives in cities can find themselves on a country road. Rounding a bend, they are confronted with a turnoff that leads up a valley. Pastures and copses of oaks dominate the foreground; while farther up the valley the road winds and disappears into older forest. A stream lined with lush foliage follows the road for some distance and then is lost from view, though its route is indicated by the groves of older trees. Far up the valley, a last bend in the road can be glimpsed. Beyond that, higher hills take on a bluish, hazy cast, blending imperceptibly with into distant mountains that are flanked by great cumulous clouds. Such scenes can cause people to stop in their tracks, transfixed by the intense sense of longing and beauty, determined to explore that valley, to see where the road leads. We are what we are today because our primordial

ancestors followed paths and riverbanks over the horizon. At such moments we confront remnants of our species' ancient past.

(Dutton 2009, pp. 27-28)

Dutton's words here can be seen to articulate some core principles expressed by this study; the significance that we instinctually derive from the undertaking of a *journey*, and an underlying, universal, foundation upon which our values as human beings are structured, that which perpetuates our survival. However, and in light of the previous chapters, we may consider the assertions made by Komar and Melamid to be in some sense misguided. The promotion of defined aesthetic criteria as being those to which we are naturally predisposed (and as such as the yardstick of aesthetic 'good') can be seen as capitulation to the so-called *Naturalistic Fallacy* (Moore 1903), the erroneous notion that everything that is naturally occurring is necessarily 'good' (in the axiological sense)<sup>64</sup>. Such a position, sometimes referred to as *Darwinian Aesthetics* (Thornhill 1998, Orians & Heerwagen 1992 and Kaplan 1992), is refuted by the difficulties in identifying definable attributes of aesthetic worth (as outlined in the first chapter of this study) and the paradox of the subjective individual mandating objective axiological 'truths' (as described in chapter three). As such, I do not consider Komar and Melamid's study to be demonstrative of universal artistic quality, rather that it is purely telling of an innate fascination with the natural landscape, one produced by the crossing of *distance* that it demands of the human being. We may suggest that it is *distance itself* that is consequently expressed as being of a universal allure.

However, in confrontation with the challenges outlined above, within this work I have sought to state a case for the acknowledgment of objective artistic worth, though in a way that does not presuppose (or require) any prescribed (or definable) aesthetic characteristics. The concept of *Accumulative Value* (that I introduce within the first chapter) represents my claim upon (and rationale for) this position, arguing that the totality of an art object's intellectual considerations and explorations (over historical time) are an intrinsic attribute of the object itself and a qualifier of its incontestable value. These aggregated labours (of many individuals over a duration of time) propel the object into the upper

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<sup>64</sup> There are obvious instances where this is not the case, rape and tribal violence being prevalent within many mammalian species does not mean that these are ethically justifiable.

echelons of our (widely acknowledged<sup>65</sup>) cultural hierarchy; the artwork a *vessel* for these collective endowments of meaning.

This concept however has a number of evident limitations, chief among them that the value it denotes is strictly a product of *hindsight*. The notion of *Accumulative Value* (being non prescriptive of aesthetic criteria) is not useful in ascertaining the worth of current (or perhaps even recent) creative works; those that have lacked the time and exposure to have this intellectual architecture structured around them. As such, it is a proposal of little veracity in the promotion of specific (new) works over others, ‘high art’ over ‘low art’ (or mere forms of entertainment), in our contemporary situation. Moreover, one may question whether this idea is actually needed at all, that the works fulfilling this criteria have evidently stood the test of time, their value (and cultural status) not requiring any further reinforcement. This last point however, is one to which I have come to disagree. In confrontation with the cultural conditions expressed within chapter one, we have seen an erosion in the will to uphold the great work of art as a defining cultural achievement, instead, in a bid for some ill-defined appearance of equitability and egalitarianism, we have perhaps entered a period in which *all* must be regard as equal in worth. With value as an intrinsically oppositional phenomena (chapter two), the equilibrium of such uniformity is fatal. As O’Kelly writes:

Art is not easy. It is there for everybody, but it requires effort and not everybody is prepared to make an effort. And because we have come to believe (rightly) that everybody has a right to the glories of artistic appreciation, we seem to have entered an era of compromise and condescension, in art as in education. If art is too difficult, too puzzling, too different, for the majority of people, then we insist on lowering standards of appreciation for fear of making anybody feel inadequate. The god of “access for all” has become a satanic destroyer of the imaginative leap.

(O’Kelly 2007, pp. 3-4)

As has been suggested, with the decline in perceptions of art’s intrinsic worth (as a product of these circumstances) we can increasingly witness its value being defined by its tertiary (or instrumental)

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<sup>65</sup> Recall the YouGov poll cited in chapter one and its indications of a widely prevalent hierarchy in cultural production.

contributions to society, as O’Kelly comments, ‘making art a branch of the social services’ (p.3). Art is difficult, an argument can perhaps be made that it *must* be, yet in an unwillingness to concede to this (for fear of propounding exclusivity), the arts are evermore justified in terms that are easy for consumption by the least discerning, arguably the least *interested*, diminishing its stake in contemporary life; for what value is there in the summit without the mountain beneath it?

The central question of this study has been the ways (and the extent to which) we can regard technology, and its cultural influence, as being culpable for these conditions. In consummation of the previous chapters, some conclusions to this provocation can now be drawn.

In reflecting upon the notion of *Accumulative Value*, we may perceive parallels to Benjamin’s aura, its inherent constituents and vulnerabilities sharing distinct commonalities. Perhaps an artwork’s *Accumulative Value* can be regarded as the temporal component of the aura’s ontology, the, as Benjamin writes, ‘quintessence of everything about it since its creation that can be handed down, from its material duration to the historical witness that it bears’ (Benjamin 2008, p.7). As such, the effect of technological reproduction upon this essence (as detailed in chapter four) is clearly regarded as considerably degrading. With our current ability to encounter virtually any object in reproduced form, and outside of a context that could enforce such accumulated histories upon it, we may question the long-term implications for our very understandings of *objecthood*. Generations born into these circumstances, encountering such simulacra through ever more convincing (yet increasingly opaque) interfaces may soon regard all experience (whether actual or virtual) to be of commensurate legitimacy. With technology’s advancing capability to, not merely image the world, but to simulate physical interactions within it (consider leafing through the pages of a digital book on a touch-screen device), the direction of travel can be vividly discerned. Confronting the telepresent conveniences that digital experience permits, little by little we are perhaps coming to view the world with an expectation that *every-thing, always*, must be immediately *at-hand*.

It may be proposed that such *expectations* can be seen to account for a declining appetite for immersed engagement, an unwillingness to embark upon the intellectual *distances* that separate us from a meaningful encounter with the art object. This, combined with the diminishing relevance applied to the

notions of *remoteness* and *scarcity*, due again to technological accessibility, can perhaps explain (at least in part) cultural circumstances in which the perceived imperative for a sustained commitment in one's encounters is progressively sidelined. Looking back upon Erikson's (2001) discussion of our escalating presumptions of *speed* in daily life (identified in chapter four), we may also advance some telling inferences. Speed, naturally, implies the temporal duration experienced between a starting point and a goal, Erikson describing how technologies accelerate the fulfilment of this at advancing velocities. Crucially though, Erikson suggests that our presumptions of speed are *contagious*, spreading to other domains of life and shaping our view of (and behaviours within) the world by proxy. As Erikson notes in illustration of this:

‘A political scientist recently studied the development of the annual financial debate in the Norwegian parliament, comparing the speed of speech in selected years from 1945 to 1995. He shows that the members of parliament spoke at an average velocity of 584 phonemes per minute in 1945. In 1980, the number of sounds had risen to 772, and in 1995 it had reached 863. In other words, the average politician spoke 50 per cent faster in 1995 than his or her predecessors did in the mid 1940s.

(Erikson 2001, p.273)

Considering this, may we regard Erikson's *contagious* understanding of technology as a cultural influence to be applicable to other aspects of its functioning, besides those of just speed? The egalitarian promise of a technological utopia (sought, to a degree, by Benjamin and countless others) can perhaps be regarded as having reached some form of fruition, conspicuously within the Western world. 72% of UK citizens now own a smartphone, a miniaturised supercomputer with which we can document, edit and broadcast our daily lives globally with a level of scope and efficiency far beyond the capabilities of major television networks just decades ago. Every idea, every opinion can be cast out into the ether, visible to the world and with a bare minimum of regulatory oversight. Everyone is a journalist (though one without editorial restriction); avidly documenting the ‘fascinating’ exploits of their own lives as the monoliths of old media try desperately to cling to relevance, publishing snappier, more sensational and populist editorials to optimise a click-baited readership. For all its fantastic

virtues, the equitability of the online space can result in a situation where meaning and truth face obliteration. In such an open, unmediated environment, the authority of a once judicious and guiding elite crumbles; all ‘truths’ can become equally ‘true’.

If such characteristics of the Internet age were to be considered as *contagious*, becoming broader, more far-reaching social *expectations* (following Erikson’s line of argument), what, do we suppose, would the implications of this for a culture look like? Perhaps an increased dismissal of institutions and elites, rejecting their perceived authority? Maybe an assumption that all opinions are equally valid, that all voices should be listened to with an equivalent weighting of legitimacy? An expectation of openness, ease of access and accessibility in our encounters? A perennial distraction, rather than engaged immersion? A prioritising of entertainment over intellectual challenge? An assessment that every object, as seen through the homogenising lens of digital interface, is of equivalent (and transient) worth? A situation in which the public justifications for one’s work are based on numerical data (in the terms of page views, subscribers and ‘likes’), and the slide toward an undemanding populism that this encourages?

I would suggest that such conditions can be evidenced within our contemporary situation, and technological progress has (in part) encouraged their manifestation.

I consider this a defensible proposition, that the Internet may be regarded as a *Competitive Cognitive Artefact* (see chapter one) not just for the individual, but for culture at large; an environment that we increasingly inhabit, but one that diminishes our ability to derive value from our real-world encounters. As has been proposed within this study, the implications of this for the art object are potentially severe, however, within such circumstances, one may argue that it can come to serve a timely new imperative.

‘Screen-stacking’<sup>66</sup> has become a popular buzzword within technology circles (particularly in advertising), denoting our growing propensity to consume multiple channels of media simultaneously (an unfocused gluttony described with an obnoxious compound phrase perhaps worthy of Huxley’s writing). As of 2014, it was reported that 56% of American television audiences were engaged concurrently with other digital activates (via smartphones, laptops and tablets) whilst for Japanese viewers this rose as high as 79%. The often remarked upon shortening of our attention spans (studies suggesting a fall from 12 seconds in 2000 to 8.25 seconds in 2015<sup>67</sup>) is surely a consequence of these escalating connections to which we feel obliged to commit our gaze; ‘the audience is an examiner, but a distracted one’ (Benjamin 2008, p.35).

As remarked by Iregui (in chapter four) and critiqued within his creative works, we are increasingly overwhelmed, pulled in multiple directions simultaneously as the once remote (and spatially confined) interaction becomes ever present. The boundaries of work and free time blur, we feel compelled to document ourselves on social media, defining our self worth through the ceaseless courting of group adulation. Further, as asserted by Virilio (chapter four), our conceptions of spatial and temporal locality are contorted to a point of vertigo-inducing disorientation, a horizonless *placelessness*, in which everything is *here* and it is always *now*; a contextless existence in which past and future, near and far are reconciled to obsolescence. As has been proposed, our capacity to derive value from our encounters is diminished here, scarified in service of our infatuation over convenience and utility.

Yet the work of art, in the glow of its aura, is without utility, a *nearness* to it defying convenience. There is perhaps no other object in the world imbued with *distance* to a comparable measure; its singular, unique existence at an exclusive position in space and its historical timeline stretching backwards through the object from its terminus in the present moment. It is these things that define its essence. Within an immersed encounter with the work of art, we are uniquely occupied in the traversing of these distances, its is an experience of undistilled *context*, the likes of which are increasingly absent from our daily lives. As such, we may identify the art object as an *antidotal* influence upon the technologically manifest obscurities and anxieties of our present time; though only if a level of cultural significance allotted to its aura is perennially assured.

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<sup>66</sup> See: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffbercovici/2014/07/10/using-a-second-screen-while-watching-tv-is-now-the-norm/#318572ce3a99>

<sup>67</sup> See: <http://www.statisticbrain.com/attention-span-statistics/>

As has been illustrated by the numerous art objects referred to in this study, and our extended consideration of Benjamin's aura, such things ground us in a meaningful experience of the world, helping us to question our place within it; they are an immovable constant in a landscape warping under the influence of technological change. Moreover, as expressed in chapter four, the work of art can assist in revealing the implications of these changes, reestablishing the human being, and their inherent values, within the machinery of technological progression.

It may perhaps be suggested that this is an incidental, yet expressive, consequence of technology as a cultural influence; that it forces upon us a necessity to continually pinpoint and refine the direction of our values in the face of technological change (just as the prevalence of instrumentalism, as discussed in the first chapter, forces us to reassert our advocacy of art's intrinsic worth). The world is changing, and so we are duty-bound to consider the aspects of ourselves that will morph in its wake. Without the emergence of the *inauthentic*, the very concept of *authenticity* is meaningless, its very notion ungraspable; like all of our values, such an idea can only exist in relation to its antithesis.

Amidst technology's transformations of space, the cultural identity of art may indeed be regarded as in jeopardy, though perhaps it is only in light of such *vulnerability* that our values can become sharpened in revelation of its significance to us. We desire most that which we do not have, the aura's demise perhaps marks the dawning of its resulting renewal; provoking our cognisance as to the value of distance.

Reflecting O'Kelly's statement that; 'The Arts Council has a duty to elitism' (p.6). I regard the considerations of this study as mandating of an emboldened conversation of art's value (or at least a more varied one) to be publically aired by cultural organisations and their spokesmen; one that is less dependant upon claims to instrumental benefits, and indeed, acknowledges the often limited (or spuriously stated) impacts of these.

Additionally, with the recognition of an object's *Accumulative Value* being dependant upon one's depth of contextual understanding, I consider the role of (publicly funded) museum and gallery education departments to be critical; providing robust and rigorous art-historical learning whilst

inciting challenging debate. The notion that ‘all opinions are equally valid’ may, in time, prove legitimate, but not until all of those opinions are equally well informed.

Subsequently, all online reproductions of works (and the forms in which they are presented) should be thoughtfully and judiciously published (by all organisations across art and culture), continually reaffirming the significance of first-hand encounters (to which the previous two recommendations would attest) and the on-going imperative for physical institutions as providers of our cultural confrontations.

For reasons of language, access and first-hand experience, the cultural conditions explored by this study have primarily focused upon the United Kingdom, further research internationally could yield interesting findings, noting similarities and discrepancies, and evaluating them accordingly. Such work could be useful in examining the further social factors (in addition to technological change) that shape public perceptions of the arts and the priorities of cultural organisations.

During a ceremony at Tramway in Glasgow in December 2015 the annual (often controversial) *Turner Prize* was awarded to a young architectural collective named *Assemble*, in recognition of their project *Granby Four Streets*, in which the group assisted in the refurbishment of several dilapidated houses in the Toxteth area of Liverpool. The group had collaborated with an existing project begun by residents of the area (who had formed the Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust (CLT) in 2011) joining in with this to propose uses for the site, assist in building work and run community workshops. To the group, the nomination was reportedly surprising (regarding themselves as a socially conscious design initiative rather than as ‘artists’), indeed, this was the first time that the prize had been awarded to either a non-artist or a collective.

Whilst in previous years the *Turner Prize* had been a lightning rod for scathing derision in the tabloid press, that year, such vitriol was conspicuously absent. The project’s justifications were evidently self-explanatory; assisting with plumbing and running craft workshops within a disadvantaged community is obviously a good thing to be doing. Alistair Hudson (current Director of Middlesbrough Institute for Modern Art), was a jury member of the 2015 prize, an advocate of ‘useful art’ who has stated that (particularly within a time of economic cutbacks) ‘the value of art almost isn’t enough, you know, its not quite enough’<sup>68</sup>. That when people are in dire need of social services (schools, hospitals etc.), that the arts need to directly tackle these concerns, justifying their value upon an ability to do so.

In the grand scheme of things, and in their capacity to meet such essential provisions in a meaningful way, I consider this *ability* of the arts, as propounded by Hudson, to be a myth, and a contemptible one.

Whilst I would not want to criticise *Assemble* for their nomination to this award (this evidently being an unsolicited surprise), their winning of it is demonstrative of such pernicious claims and their growing permissibility. The narcissistic hijacking of people’s real world struggles as an artistic resource.

Toxteth, as it so happens, is the area of Liverpool in which I have lived for some time. Whilst I am generally not afflicted (to any significant degree) by the concerns disproportionately felt by those living

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<sup>68</sup> See: <http://www.visitmima.com/about/team/director/>

in this deprived part of the city, it is nonetheless discomposing to see life so difficult for so many. Rows upon rows of streets lay boarded up and abandoned, the church at the end of Princess Road is crumbling away, buried beneath the undergrowth, its plot of land up for sale.

Perhaps we conceive of *ourselves*, to some degree, against the background of the cultural landscape that we can identify around us. If such is the case, the imperative, as a society (as a civilisation), to reveal the numinous and transcendent in people's lives is surely of consequence; to know that there is beauty to be found in the world.

To stand breathless at the summit, in heroic transformation at the conquest of one's former self; in the west the sun is setting, its aura revealing the divided line between earth and sky as it burns the far horizon.

END



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## APPENDICES

### **Appendix .1**

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#### **Spatial Drawing**

Systematic mark making and the materiality of line

Exploring the concept of drawing has remained central to my practice for some years now; asking what it is to generate marks and to describe with line.

The nature of line itself has become a key consideration in much of my work and I have increasingly begun to regard it as a fundamental element, one that transcends mediums and emerges within numerous disciplines.

Line begins, it spans a distance, and ultimately it ends. It is durational; it traces a progression from one place to another. From the marks of a pencil, to a flow of prose, to the sustained oscillations of a musical note; the spatial and temporal actuality of line charts its course. Investigating an understanding of line in this way has led me to a practice and working methodology that is, in a sense, self-reflexive; marks that describe the process of their own making - a drawing of drawing itself.

Producing work in this way, I have felt the need to impose distance; a separation between the drawing and the maker's hand, with its tendency toward subjective or expressive gesture. All that can be evident is the movement of drawing itself and a tightly regimented underlying system that a viewer can instantly comprehend and visually reenact.

The drawings are never finished, they are a footprint of a system that has been played-out; one that existed before the drawing's creation and that persists beyond the marks left behind. Like the tubular clusters of sand that identify a lugworm's passage across the shoreline - the drawings are an empty shell, the remnant of an action that once occurred.

Line can multiply across a surface, it can trace paths through space and even navigate along with the passage of time. What then is line, and how can we categorise its materiality and formal properties?

Flatness is perhaps the property that we most associate with drawing, but line is not restricted to a two-dimensional plane. Line can navigate space just as it does surface. The capacity to emerge within both of these contexts reveals line as something neither wholly flat nor wholly spatial; it is an abstracted, conceptual form, one whose formal properties are not anchored to material. Not flatness then, but *masslessness*; it is the absence of materiality that characterises the nature of line.

This however raises a problem, as it is objects and their material elements that frame our experience of even the most conceptually driven work in a visual medium. How can we perceive line without material, without mass? In pursuit of this, I have attempted to work with line using a medium that is divorced from the static and sculptural nature of physical material, one that flows in constant motion and is the weightless foundation of visual perception itself; light.

As an aside, when starting to consider the rationale and direction of my practice prior to beginning university, I visited the Hayward Gallery's 2006 retrospective of the American minimalist artist Dan Flavin. This became a formative experience in shaping the direction of future work and specifically the considerations that I later had around drawing, light and spaces. The exhibition concluded with a gallery of drawings, pared back and sparse linear assemblages on large sheets of mathematical paper. Regarding these, I thought about the connections that existed between the flat paper diagrams and environmental neon installations that enveloped the galleries below. Did the paper represent the spaces or did the spaces represent the paper? Perhaps drawing distinctions between the two was irrelevant?

The grids and co-ordinates of Flavin's graph paper drawings allowed for a level of mathematical precision and perfect symmetries to be aligned, but also points in physical space to be mathematically determinable through their relationship to the artist's coloured pencil markings. I thought about how such grids could be mapped onto a space, allowing for the drawing to transcend its flat surface and be manifested within the surroundings of the gallery.

These works on paper also changed the way I thought about the installation's materiality, Flavin's coloured pencil marks were single abstract lines, depicting merely light itself and making no reference to the neon tubes and housings that typify the artist's practice. Through this, I began to regard the installations purely in terms of their emitted and reflected light, ignoring the steel and glass fixtures that produced these effects. These objects were vessels within which light could reside, an idea that would come to shape my thinking around material and the ways in which light could be moulded into distinct and perceivable forms.

The transference of my drawings into spatial interventions began with the conceptual and aesthetic properties of systematic mark-making (the build up of flat geometric forms producing a prism-like depth on a flat surface) and led to explorations of materiality and the physical properties of light. Throughout this, process and an underlying set of operations that structure the work's making have remained paramount. The application of this system to a physical site drives the installation's production, considering the parameters of the space just as the boundaries of the paper shaped the drawing's initial flat realisations. The space shapes the work and is in-turn manipulated by it, viewer's navigations through the environment re- formed through the shift in architecture that the work produces.

The occurrences of the work within a space are temporary and singular, the installations are themselves manifestations of a site that cannot be removed from this very narrow context. They exist for a time and then they are gone. Once again though, the system of their making remains, allowing for the work's re-emergence at another time, in another place. More events than than objects, viewers understand that they are witnessing an ephemeral happening, one that cannot be owned or taken away but one that is unique, and inseparable from their surroundings.

like a drawing created and then erased, the installation works are always destroyed, the spaces they once inhabited returning to their previous architectural arrangement and function. Gradually, this cycle has become the framework with which I approach my practice; the practice itself part of an ongoing system of experimentation and evaluation, production and deconstruction. Titling works that exist in this way proved difficult for a time, naming something that either has a fleeting existence or that is one

small part of some incomplete system. Reverting to purely numerical titles allowed for a further distancing from the work, each one a catalogued experiment with the potential of numbers for indefinite addition allowing for continual reproduction.

Diminishing any attachment felt towards individual works was also a function of serial titles: a way of becoming less precious about pieces and knowing them as merely a temporary strand of one ongoing project. Eventually, all the works fade into nothingness, back into an empty void - the determinate body of absence that the pieces leave behind.

### **Light out of the void**

The experiential nature of the work and its fundamental ephemerality dictates that it exists in this continual state of flux, between being and un-being. As a blank sheet of paper offers up a void in which a drawing can be produced, so to do empty spaces permit a volume that can be filled by spatial interventions. It is the potentiality of this emptiness that characterises the void, the potential for an occupancy that is unfilled and the return of things into the nothingness.

Using light as a primary medium, I have increasingly questioned its connection to empty space and the reciprocal relationship that exists between light and dark - whereby one can- not exist without the other.

Just as we require silence for a sound to come to the fore, and blankness to understand a composition on a flat surface; it is only in darkness where one can witness light return. There is a co-dependence between these opposites, they are dualities of being that are tightly bound to one another.

Our relationship to light in nature is one that is based around this duality, the daily shifting of night into day. I think it is in these transitional stages that our connection to light is at its most profound; the spectral effects of sunlight drawing a line along the passage of time as the sun arcs from horizon to horizon.

The earth turns, systems of relativity and motion tracing the line of its path around the solar mass -  
darkness falls - bringing with it the potential for a new day to dawn and the knowledge that in another  
place, in another time, light is returning once again.