Art in the Age of Emergence

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By

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This book is dedicated to Aihua Zhou.

Art is mind.

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PREFACE

I live literally one step away from the liberal arts university where I teach in Ventura County, California. During the semesters my friend and colleague Nathan Tierney stays with us, traveling back and forth to Napa on the weekends, where he has made his home with his family. Nathan is a professor of philosophy. I love having him live with us, because in the evenings we will often sit together and talk about philosophy and art over a gin and tonic. This book is a direct result of those conversations over the course of the last couple of years, during which Nathan has guided me through the challenges of navigating aesthetics, showed me where to avoid the rocks and where to find solid anchorage. It's taken patience on his part, I think, because I'm easily distracted by the scents of paint, turpentine and walnut alkyd, by the quick necessities of imagination and by the slower practicalities of making. I love being in the studio, but I want to understand the aesthetic issues that confront contemporary representational artists, thinking that there is little point in either working in the studio to make representational art or being outspoken about it if I don't know why I make it or why I think it matters greatly to our cultural well-being. It was on one of those gin and tonic flavored evenings that Nathan suggested that I would like to come to a lecture that he had organized at the University by the theologian Philip Clayton, who was to talk about complexity and emergence.[1]

The following afternoon I strolled across campus to have lunch with colleagues, and then walked to the hall where Clayton was to speak. An engaging and charismatic speaker, he made a thorough general introduction of complexity and emergence as they might apply to theology, describing the ultimate emergent quality as God, and although I was dissatisfied with ideas of how emergence might justify a panentheist but steadfastly Christian God, [2] I knew that emergence offered an important, fresh way of looking at things that are not easily defined by reductive science. I left the lecture feeling tremendously challenged and excited by the idea that emergence, which describes the characteristics of forms that come out of complex systems, could apply especially well to how we experience art, how we understand aesthetics in relation to our evolving mind, and how we understand the creative process of making representational art.[3] I suddenly realized that considering the relationship

between emergence and consciousness could lead us to a description of what distinguishes art objects from other things as we perceive them through our senses. Emergence allows us to define art! I walked home feeling overwhelmed, as if the switch to a powerful current had suddenly been thrown to "on" in my head. I realized that emergence could be a powerful foundation for an aesthetics that would doubtlessly support representational art, but didn't yet know what its implications would be.

Nathan arrived home, cheerful that the lecture had gone well, and said, "Well, what did you think?"

> "Very good – I think there's a lot of potential there for representational art. I wish Clayton would write a book about it."
>
> "How so?"

I explained my idea to Nathan and handed him a gin and tonic.

> "You'd better write it."
>
> "Me?"

My favorite chair is placed beside the morning glory framed window so I can look over the roses while I write, and during the day I had been watching a baby robin take its first nervous steps out of a little nest perched up in the eaves, tangled among the vines. All day it had been clinging to the cane that supports the vines, periodically visited by its mother and father, who have been busy bringing it food and perhaps encouraging it to take that first leap of faith. My little dog had been watching too, waiting outside the back door, ready to pounce should it fall to the ground. There was tension: I could imagine the questions: "Will my new wings open? Will I fly like my mother and father? Is the air my friend?" And not only did the robin have the fear of that leap but he had to consider that if his wings failed him and he fell to the earth he would doubtlessly be snapped up and crushed in the jaws of the predator. When I got home from the lecture the robin was still up there, considering whether or not to leap into the void. Suddenly I felt very much like him.

> "Why not? You know all the artists, you know what's happening, and you're ideally placed to do this."

I looked at the robin.

> "But I'm not qualified - I don't have the answers."

Nathan smiled.

"You're coming at it the wrong way. What are the questions?"
"What do you mean?"
"Ask yourself what the questions are that you want answered about representational art."
"I want to know why representational artists work for months to produce our work when we could easily whip out a quick piece of readymade appropriation. What's the point of working so hard on making these canvases and sculptures, of exploring meanings and signs and literally figuring out compositions that best express an idea when we are told that these efforts are out of date and irrelevant? Why do we do these things? Who are we doing them for? And when a work of art is made why are some people fanatically devoted to it, while others remain indifferent? Is representational art still relevant in the computer age?"

"There you go. That's your book."

I realized Nathan was right. Mastering painting is hard enough without doubting our motivations or aimlessly meandering along the currents of existential streams of thought. There has been a great deal of table-thumping rhetoric about the decline of traditional studio art over the last hundred years, and an abundance of complaint about the decadence of postmodern art, but there has been little thought about what the aesthetics of contemporary representational art might be. I decided to write a book that would answer my questions, basing it upon emergence and consciousness.

The art we make always reflects the ideologies of the times. In the first decades of the 21st Century we approached the end of the post world wars era, which passed from living memory into history, the recollection of those atrocious wars retreating from personal experience back into the quiet records of old books and articles, where they became strangely impersonal, their horrors tamed by the distance of time. Although there is much discussion about the events that signpost the beginning and end of the modern period, it began roughly at the end of the reign of Elizabeth I, who died in 1603, characterized by urbanization and the invention of industrial machines – when the alchemical and neo-classical ideas revived during the renaissance developed into the reductive science of the enlightenment. In the same way that the renaissance followed on from the catastrophic plague-racked social and economic collapse of the medieval period, we reached the end of modernity when the wars bankrupted the British, Prussian, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires and fractured the

ideology that had driven them. Postmodernism was the response to the social and economic disasters of those wars, an effort to explain what was happening during a period of turmoil in which the old philosophies and social structures could no longer hold their own against the tumbling collapse of the institutions that had upheld them.

Postmodernists instinctively recoiled from the old ways that had led to the disasters of war and sought to find an alternative path into a future that would be bearable. Consequently much of the work of postmodernist thinkers was deliberately aimed at aiding in the dismantling of the old order, and had a destructive theme to it that eroded faith in old social institutions and ideas, including some that should have been left alone because although they might appear to have been firmly a part of the enlightenment, they are of course perennial truths of our shared humanity. However, because the ideas that had driven the enlightenment were clearly unsustainable, and were easily attacked on moral and intellectual grounds for the dehumanizing outcomes they had led to (death camps; millions of war dead; the economic ruin of Europe; wholesale destruction of infrastructure), by the turn of the millennium postmodernism had become the prevailing culture of the humanities departments of universities and colleges, dominating academic discourse.

There is general agreement that we have come to the end of meaningful writing about postmodernity, but there's been little serious consideration of what it's followed by, of how the incoming big idea might impact the way we make art, as changes of the big idea always do. What, then, is the zeitgeist of this new millennium that shapes the art we make? As my work writing this book progressed I found I had to dig down among the roots of culture, to learn how our material expressions of our conscious, sensory appreciation of reality have followed the flow of big, dominant ideas that have shaped its evolving landscape. We are clearly working in a different age now, governed by cultural circumstances that are different from those that guided our predecessors - the current is changing, right now, and the deconstructive work of the postmodern half-century is complete. Computers are transforming the way we interact. Postmodernity is being supplanted by a new emergent age, characterized by the internet's ability to bring together communities and give them the tools to organize themselves and express the truth as they see it.

Curiously, considering the shiny, futuristic technology brought to mind by modern computers one of the assembling communities is a movement of artists and thinkers that at last responds to the negativity of 20th century art by seeking to make works of art that are contemporary, but that are built upon the positive triumphs of humanism. While firmly

grounded within the digital age these are artists who love the traditional techniques of the arts, recognizing that skillfully made artwork that resembles what we see in the world and makes the connection between the beauty we experience and the things we paint is that which is most closely aligned with the way we experience life, capturing moments of our daily lives in imagery that may make those moments linger in our memories. Although computers and machines can perform faster than humans in some fields, the human creative mind is foiling our best efforts to duplicate it, and it seems unlikely that our efforts to produce great art will ever be equaled by a robot. In fact, I suspect that our current revival of interest in highly skilled representational art is a reaction against the artificiality of the commercial, smooth imagery that dominated computer screens and televisions during the last fifty years. Like the artists and intellectuals of the Italian renaissance we know something new is going on that is reshaping the way we make art in this twenty-first century. And like the art of the renaissance, the work of this new movement has a solid foundation in the art of the past and finds joy in emulating it. It, too, is deeply rooted in skillful technique and the search for beauty.

Although postmodernity has done a great deal to limit the availability of skill-based training to aspiring artists, representational art seems to have an extraordinary resilience, and continues to delight a vast majority of the population. Now the deconstruction of modernity is complete it's time to rethink our ideas about what art is, and what it does. There is no clear description of what art is in any postmodern writing, only expressions of confusion about how to define it, which usually end up in incomprehensible jargon. In fact, twentieth century art is characterized in large part by the exhibit of readymade objects in art galleries, whose purpose is to question the boundaries of what art is, without ever offering an answer.

Art objects are the quintessential outcome of the alchemy that takes place in the studio when mind is let loose to express itself in shaping material. Mind is expressed in material. I realized that in order to understand art, instead of looking for the similarities between the paintings and the sculptures we have to look at the similarities between the people looking at them. Art is better explained by looking at how the mind works than by looking at the products of mind. That's why quite a lot of this book is about consciousness, because of the direct relationship between it and the making of art objects. Before the invention of brain scanning, philosophers struggled with the difficulty of understanding consciousness without being able to penetrate into the brain to observe its action because of the fragility of the organ – but now, because we have the advantages of

scanning technologies which are able to detect activity in the brain and microscopically detailed three-dimensional maps of its physiology, we are able to learn a small amount about what is actually happening as we think. Philosophy and neuroscience feed each other in this new era of understanding the mind. When our ideas about philosophy change, our ideas about art have to change too.

Notes

[1] Phillip Clayton, *Mind and Emergence: From Quantum to Consciousness* (Oxford, 2006)

[2] Christian apologists might presuppose a Christian God then apply emergence to justify a panentheist version of him. To my mind this is putting the cart before the horse. Emergence certainly indicates hierarchy, but does the hierarchy necessarily lead to deity? Because evolution implies a progression toward perfection we may be easily persuaded that unity waits at the end of it because like Toland we may see that *"all things are from the whole, and the whole is from all things",* but is this necessarily the equivalent to a theologically defined deity? John Toland, *Pantheisticon* (Peterson, 1751), 15

[3] There are many accessible texts about how emergence and complexity are impacting science and culture: Wendy Wheeler has begun the long work of understanding the impact of emergence on politics in her *The Whole Creature*; Clayton has described complexity in his many books – among them he has edited *The Re-emergence of Emergence*, a collection of texts describing what emergence means to the social and natural sciences and religion; Christian Smith has applied emergence to sociology; Stuart Kaufman has made an effective case for an open-ended emergent spirituality; Brain Godwin has applied emergence to evolution, while Terrence W. Deacon revisits Hegel and Peirce in several interesting texts that look at how humans are unique among animals for applying their understanding of reality through signs. There are few books about the implications of complexity and emergence on art and aesthetics - *The Biologist's Mistress* by Victoria Alexander is one among a very small group.

CHAPTER ONE

AFTER POSTMODERNISM

> *"Clarissa said that I had not understood. There was nothing wrong in analyzing the bits, but it was easy to lose sight of the whole. I agreed. The work of synthesis was crucial. Clarissa said I still did not understand her, she was talking about love. I said I was too, and how babies who could not yet speak got more of it for themselves. She said no, I still didn't understand. There we had left it. No hard feelings. We had had this conversation in different forms on many occasions. What we were really talking about this time was the absence of babies from our lives."*[1]

This critical chapter will have a different tone to those that will follow it, because I find it hard to remain detached from the negative nihilism that manifested itself after the downfall of representational art during the world wars. A dark shadow fell over the collective cultural mind of the West during the twentieth century, when we celebrated negativity more thoroughly than at any other time in human culture, characterized by the writing of Adorno, Camus, and Debord, to name a handful of dystopian authors, all dead long ago. Our thinkers reflect our times: we read Hegel now and clearly see the beginning of the transition from the enlightenment toward post-modernity; we read Augustine and find the spirit of the post-classical age encapsulated in him, while in Debord the overwhelming necessities of the postmodern spectacle are perfectly described. The despair of the postmodernists, brought to them by the horrifying experiences of the world wars and the intense pressure of the cold war, led them to a pessimistic outlook in which dystopia was the only possible future; to them, everything was broken and could never be rebuilt.[2]

Complexity and emergence offer an explanation for the positive experience of the art object, and fills the gap critiqued by Adorno as the great failing of aesthetic writing - that there is no metanarrative in a world in which idealism has been crushed. And Adorno's leap to conceptualism as the solution to violence is negated by the undeniable fact of human semiotic consciousness – we must participate in reality, in making, to

maintain being - but his premise that the absence of idealist systems requires a new approach to art-making has some truth to it, although he puts the cart before the horse, to my mind.[3] The absence of idealism and the failure of postmodernity to provide an adequate response to that need means that we must come up alternate paths to a new idealism. We make art objects that are manifested in reality because this is how we express consciousness. Concepts and abstract mind games that negate reality are amusing, and might offer entertaining pataphysical distractions to while away a little time, but any idea that we have suddenly evolved out of our foundational instinct to create objects that express our understanding of the world is absurd – like our Paleolithic ancestors we must still care for our children, we still need to eat, to make safe places to sleep and to make love. Just as making babies is a fundamental necessity for the continuation of the human race, not an option, so too is expressing consciousness in the form of works of art and practical objects in order to perpetuate the evolution of our collective culture. These fundamentals ground us rather pragmatically in our sensory experience of practical, everyday reality. It's our experience of what reality lacks that drives us to create idealistic utopias. Idealism is a fundamental response to existence.

Emergence fills the void left by the collapse of postmodernism because it offers the potential for a convincing new idealism that has its foundation in scientific investigation, making room for a spirituality that is acceptable to, and made evident by, mathematics and physics, opening a door to establishing an understanding of art objects that goes beyond "mere phenomenology", and presenting a way to understand how they meet the consciousness of the beholder. The fact that new, scientifically-based ideas have developed that describe evolutionary consciousness, and therefore the existence of an historical narrative of its progression, implies the necessity for a description of the new aesthetics that go with it.

Adorno famously commented, *"To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"*[4] and the phrase has inevitably been interpreted to mean that to participate in the cultural activities that led to Auschwitz is unthinkable because to do so one must be in denial of their outcome. While it's true that the pathos of propaganda poems like "In Flanders' fields the poppies blow"[5], written in the early years of the First World War, became almost unbearable a couple of years later when that war had led to millions of deaths, and completely obscene when contrasted to images of the stacked corpses of victims of the concentration camps and gulags, the first instinct of the musicians of Berlin after the surrender of Germany in 1945 was to perform symphonies amid the ruins of their city. How can we enjoy beauty when confronted with abomination? What are we to say in response to

Adorno?

Understandably afflicted by the catastrophes of his time, and reflecting them in his treatment of aesthetics, Adorno underestimated the antiquity of the human impulse to create representational art and to enjoy beauty and all the structures that go with it, not to mention human kindness, inter-connectedness, thoughtful community and goodness, qualities which all are loosely implied by complexity and emergence and essential to human culture. Adorno was such a negative soul that in an earnest dialogue with Ernst Bloch called *'Something's Missing'* he apologized for being so positive as to defend the idea of accepting death without fear as a reasonable expectation of a life in a utopian state; and you can almost forgive him for being so miserable: in the span of human history the first fifty years of the twentieth century were outstanding for the scale of the catastrophe perpetrated by humans upon their fellow humans. Yet even the extremity of horror that we inflicted upon ourselves in that half-century period is a tiny percentage of the immense span of time and human experience since *homo sapiens* became self-aware; to base ontology upon a disgusting fraction of human experience is simply silly. To Adorno the immediacy of the horrors of the war brought such skepticism to our beleaguered collective consciousness that it was utterly inconceivable to consider the emergent experience offered by beautiful things, and he sought out its opposite as a remedy; because his perception of reality was dominated by negation he sought an aesthetics that affirmed his outlook.

To proceed too far down the path of skeptical uncertainty leads to a fall into the pit of postmodern *ad nihilo* reductionism. The philosopher Colin McGinn describes the problem of hubris and consciousness:

> *"We are suffering from what I called "cognitive closure" with respect to the mind-body problem. Just as a dog cannot be expected to solve the problems of space and time and the speed of light, that it took a brain like Einstein's to solve, so maybe the human species cannot be expected to understand how the universe contains mind and matter in combination. Isn't it really a preposterous over-confidence on our part to think that our species - so recent, so contingent, so limited in many ways - can nevertheless unlock every secret of the natural world? As Socrates always maintained, it is the wise man who knows his own ignorance."*[6]

McGinn's assessment identifies the absurdity of imagining that the human intellect is capable of comprehending the universal mind. While its true that the allure of resignation in the face of certain failure may offer an easy way to escape the challenges of not knowing, his citation of Socrates gives the lie to the seductive temptation to resign from the task of working

to understand our place in the universe - of course McGinn is posturing – although Socrates maintained that the wise man knew he knew nothing he's equally famous for quoting the Delphic maxim "*know thyself*" as an admonishment to explore personal consciousness. *Ad nihilo* is an easy way to justify decadence: Aldous Huxley confessed to it. (Huxley was the prescient author of *Brave New World*, a novel that predicted a Malthusian dystopia, characterized by a genetically engineered hierarchical social order, controlled by Pavlovian conditioning, sedative drugs, collective entertainment, technological domesticity and narcissism, similar to the culture which now threatens to dominate the West.) Huxley wrote an explanation for his embrace of nihilism in the twentieth century and expressed the narcissistic motivations of his generation for choosing it:

> *"For myself, as no doubt for most of my friends, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom. The supporters of this system claimed that it embodied the meaning--the Christian meaning, they insisted--of the world. There was one admirably simple method of confuting these people and justifying ourselves in our erotic revolt: we would deny that the world had any meaning whatever."*[7]

This description indicates laziness and self-indulgence as a pathway toward post-modern nihilism, a subjective choice of evolutionary consciousness regardless of its negative outcomes. If we seek liberation from the confinement of seeking a meaningful understanding of life by using nihilism as a key we find that the doorway opens from one cell to another, not to the open air of intellectual freedom. Here's an affirmation of the superficiality of the 20th century from Duchamp:

> *"Deep down, I believe that our century will not be very interesting compared to other centuries. I think we will be regarded as being rather limited. Ours isn't a century like the 18th century, which is impossible to love but which has its own integrity, an identity. I believe that we will be regarded as a slightly frivolous century, and that we will not be showered with the sort of praise that we have blithely been giving ourselves."*[8]

We can now move beyond Huxley's meaninglessness and Duchamp's generality with the knowledge that there is an evolutionary consciousness in which we control our choices; with confidence that emergence from complex systems implies a movement toward completion; with the knowledge that emergence implies spiritual truth; that goodness and evil are real; and that semiotics are fundamental to consciousness. These are

foundations upon which we might build a new aesthetics. For all of the negative reinforcements that constantly barrage us in postmodern culture, repeating Nietzsche's syphilitic individualism and diseased isolation, human beings are, and have always been social creatures that work together collectively to improve their lot. And as the world wars leave living memory and become history we are offered an opportunity to overcome our self-hatred and look forward to building an emergent culture, putting nihilistic thinking aside. The ideas of a fully idealized emergent culture imply that we will evolve out of modernity into a new age that will be quite different in character from the previous one.[9] Some will quickly jump to resist the utopian character of such ideas, and I hesitate to imagine a brave new world, but nevertheless, the blood of emergence and complexity doubtlessly pulses through the heart of this particular period of cultural evolution. Man is not the master of the universe which he thought he could become during the enlightenment – the hubris of the nineteenth century led to the catastrophes of the early twentieth, demonstrating quite emphatically that that philosophical system isn't beneficial to the welfare of humanity – and although our ultimate destination is unknown, we have learned that there is spiritual truth in emergent evolution. Mankind is more likeable for possessing some humility in the face of the grandeur of the universe.

Adorno's predictions of the nihilistic disintegration of civilization into barbarity may have played well to an all too human tendency toward apocalyptic millenarianism during the cold war, but will do little to satisfy the rising generations that will have no living memories of Auschwitz, no personal memory of the wars that exterminated millions, no horror of living under the intensity of a threatened nuclear catastrophe. To be sure, the potential for all these things remains, and the story of the unfolding of totalitarianism will remain burned into the narrative history of tyranny and atrocity, but the actuality of experiencing them with the searing intensity that was felt by people living in the post-war period is on the verge of becoming a matter of historical record. With time comes historical perspective, a waning of catharsis and an increase of intellectual distance. And worrying about the tendency toward the dehumanization of culture that looms like a dire specter in the heart of Debord's spectacle has instilled in many of us a thoughtful care for those attributes that make us human; a deeply held, deliberate choice to nurture those things that make life worth living.

With the growing awareness of complexity and emergence, Adorno's expectation of the "absolute reification" of the mind has proven to be misguided; art has never fully become the playground of the culture

industry, although conceptual art has been a nexus of attention; the artisans he condescended to in his *Aesthetic Theory* have continued to make art in their sphere: healthy neo-classical cultures of music, art and lyric poetry are thriving thanks to the democratic diversity of the web; which presents a world which is not anything like his idea that the culture industry would dominate society, turning us into docile, sheep-like followers of our capitalist leaders. To be sure, the choices the culture industry offers are tempting, and many succumb to the offerings of the commercial spectacle he and Debord described, but humanity will not descend into artless barbarity, because each generation carries with it the same human conscious appreciation of reality through the senses and understands (at some level) that we apprehend sensory reality through semiotic meanings, and shares the same delight in representation that has been enjoyed for the entire lifetime of the human species - this is complexity as the "very long revolution" described by Raymond Williams and re-visited by Wendy Wheeler. [10] The capitalist spectacle described by Guy Debord is dangerously seductive; and it satisfies the uninspired, but it's not truly all consuming. Succumbing to the spectacle is a choice, but the complexity offered by the web isn't limited to that choice alone.

And if emergence provides the philosophical foundation to an idealism that answers Adorno's desperate negativity and shows the optimistic flip-side of Debord's spectacular critique, what do we make of Lyotard's "incredulity towards meta-narratives" and his "postmodern condition" that had so much impact upon the second half of the last century? First, in comparison to the intensity, depth and quality of Hegel's thought, or Peirce's insight, Lyotard's writings are scruffy marginalia in the discussion of aesthetics and consciousness. His observation that the commodification of information is indicative of a radical transformation of society and human communication is an interesting sociological observation that has been used to excuse dysfunctional and antisocial behavior and implies what the Marxist critic Perry Anderson has dismissed as *"street-level relativism that often passes – in the eyes of friends and foes alike – for the hallmark of postmodernism"*.[11] In fact the outcome of the extension of communication provided by the Internet has been to increase the possibilities for community building, and instead of homogenizing society into Debord's unified spectacle it has created numerous overlapping communities that emerge from a glorious complexity of social interaction.

Instead of a unified and monolithic cultural edifice the complex art world is one that includes numerous overlapping art worlds – the financial market of art as a commodity; the art expos; the populist art of tourist-

oriented museums; boutique galleries; American demonstration conferences; university art departments; the ateliers; galleries that cater to art that represents the latest fashion (but hardly the most recent intellectual concepts); amateur competition galleries, the community of traditional skill based artists, of installation art (including Disneyland) and so on. All these different art worlds overlap each other and intersect one another like clouds bumping into and merging with and separating from each other on a windy day, and none of them show any sign of dissipating particularly quickly, because they have all developed strong community identities as the result of the increasingly easy communication that has been made available by the internet and smartphones. We have become accustomed to the contradictions of these overlapping communities, although there are occasional outbursts of anger that one gets more attention than another, or expresses ideas that contradict those of another community, or (the gravest of sins and the cause of much righteous protest) that the artists of one community get more money than those in another. Yet this diversification of the art world has not at all changed our appreciation of beauty. Human consciousness is at the heart of understanding how beauty works.

Adorno's *"After Auschwitz…"* comment makes no claim that the enlightenment had a monopoly on brutality. We must also recognize the brutality of the postmodern composer Stockhausen's notoriously obscene claim of the September 11, 2001, attack on the twin towers in New York as a work of art:

> *"So, what has happened is, of course - and now all of you have to change your frame of mind – is the biggest artwork which has ever existed, that the mind can accomplish in such an act, something which we in music were never even able to dream about, that people can practice like crazy for ten years, totally fanatically for a concert. And then die. (Hesitation) And that is the greatest artwork that ever existed in the entire cosmos. Now just imagine what happened here. These are people who are so concentrated on this one thing, on this one act, and then five thousand people are chased into the resurrection. In one moment. I couldn't do this. Compared to that we are nothing, as composers."*[12]

Stockhausen's claiming of September 11th as the self-admittedly criminal *"greatest artwork that ever existed in the entire cosmos"* emphatically indicates that we have reached the end of postmodern art. Hutcheon knew it when she asked for a name for the age after post-modernism at the end of the 2003 re-publication of her *"Politics of Postmodernity"*. The September 11th attacks are the symbolic conclusion of postmodernity; after them every attempt at appropriation seems

superficial and carries with it the staining obscenity of mass-murder. But postmodernism was not one of the big ideas itself, it was just the debris of the fall of the big idea of scientific reductionism, spreading out and dispersing like the suffocating, slow motion dust-cloud of those collapsing buildings, full of fury. The ideological battle against totalitarianism upon which postmodernity was based took second fiddle after the spectacular threat of religious fundamentalism was dramatically and symbolically revealed as the greatest threat to liberal democracy and capitalism, galvanizing our defense of Western culture. We have completed the cycle of the experimental deconstruction of culture only to arrive at the same place as it began, accompanied by brutality and impersonal mass murder. If we can't write poetry after Auschwitz, neither can we co-opt anything we please as a work of art after 9/11; artists can't have their cake and eat it too.

Meta-post-alter

Hutcheon's appeal for a naming of what follows post-modernism caused a flurry of activity among scholars in the ranks of the critical writing community, eager to make their scratch in the cultural record, resulting in ambitious formations like "metamodernism", "hypermodernism", "digimodernism", "alter-modernism" and so forth. The only thing these efforts had in common was their complete failure to redefine our experience of living in the new millennium, simply attempting to perpetuate the postmodern narrative (one of the paradoxes of such attempts to extend postmodern theory is that they contradict a famous claim made by a central figure of postmodernist writing, Jean Francois Lyotard, that narrative history is meaningless[13]). One of these renaming efforts, however, brought me a moment of delight when reading an article titled "Metamodernism" by the enthusiastic young writers Vermeulen and Van den Akker, who noted a new interest in romanticism in the work of certain artists:

> *"If these artists look back at the Romantic it is neither because they simply want to laugh at it (parody) nor because they wish to cry for it (nostalgia). They look back instead in order to perceive anew a future that was lost from sight."*[14]

For a wonderful moment I thought that they had noticed the idealism evident in the growing contemporary representational art movement, or a steam-punkish delight in a past that never was; after all, they too proclaimed the end of postmodernity. But almost in the same sentence that

they raised my hopes, I realized that the authors were talking about something completely different, about Gablik-style hints of cynical quotes of romanticism in the work of a few unhappy artists who regard their own quoting of idealism as an inauthentic response. They continued:

> *"Metamodern neo-romanticism should not merely be understood as re-appropriation; it should be interpreted as re-signification: it is the re-signification of 'the commonplace with significance, the ordinary with mystery, the familiar with the seemliness of the unfamiliar, and the finite with the semblance of the infinite'."*[15]

In other words, even when we get past the clichés of irony, juxtaposition and self-reflexivity, their "metamodern" romantic idealism is a fake, a fraud, and a parody. While a nod toward idealism may be made, deliberately poor craftsmanship and secondhand imagery place it firmly in a negative context. This is a feeble new mannerism, the resort of artists mocking things that have already been. You can't re-appropriate or re-signify idealism and pretend it means something else; there's a word for such fakery: hypocrisy. If the artists are self-admittedly duplicitous in their work, we must ask ourselves if these are works that we want to allow space in our consciousness. And when you look at the art cited by Vermeulen and van den Akker, the immature urge for idealism in the art is clearly tainted by the artists' dystopian ideology. In fact, the art of these mannerists describes a failure of idealism, a nonsensical, absurd posturing towards idealism that is neither heartfelt nor truthful, nor driven by any honest belief in an idea that is greater than an individual.

So my hope faded. It's business as usual; although it looks like a move toward idealism, this is conceptual mannerism with a weird, chemical, cancer-causing, artificial sugarcoating to sweeten it. These artists and critics position idealistic desires for authenticity and positivity as superficial layers within a cake of ironic outlook, permeating sincerity with the knowledge that there is no truth, no possibility of discovering genuine transcendence in the postmodern world. In effect, they claim that the urge to seek out authenticity is itself inauthentic. The worldview articulated by postmodernist artists is unable to include sincerity or authenticity as legitimate ideals – such ideals are antithetical to the nihilism endorsed by Adorno, Derrida, *et alia*.

What is authenticity to an artist? The word itself inspires confusion among a postmodern generation, who have been taught that authenticity is irrelevant, outdated and unimportant, but clearly it's a sought after quality. Authenticity refers to the original - to the source. Authentic art objects are those that are made in the original way, they're the real thing, they're

based on fact - on the traditional acceptance of their integrity to what is correctly done. Modern curators sought to endow their collections with the "aura" of authenticity described by Walter Benjamin in his seminal essay: *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.[16] Here the work of art was described as an original object that possessed an aura of authenticity, and adopted the role of the religious artifacts collected by the wealthy during and after the crusading era. This "aura" was enhanced by the concentration of money about the object.[17]

Inauthenticity can bother people immensely when they aren't aware of it – the famed British archaeologist Colin Renfrew reviewed an exhibit including the Paleolithic Lion Man sculpture, gazing at it in appreciative wonder for *"a happy fifteen minutes"*, only to find that it was an excellent replica, which turned his pleasure into disappointment.[18] The Californian artist John Nava indicated the profound value of authenticity when speaking about the snake held by the replicant exotic dancer in the old science fiction movie, Blade Runner, in which Harrison Ford asks the dancer Zhora if the python she dances with is real – her reply is *"Of course it's not real. Do you think I'd be working in a place like this if I could afford a real snake?"* She's a fake human dancing with a fake snake, and must be eliminated.[19]

Isn't it curious that this attention to the real thing has been more of a burgeoning issue in the postmodern century than it was in the reductive 19th century, when vast collections of casts were unashamedly made and collected as exemplars for study in the museums of the Western world? After three centuries of mass-produced inferiority being fobbed off on us as quality there's a growing hunger for authenticity. Even in China, stereotypically notorious for cheap imitations of everything you can imagine, the Jibaozhai Museum in Hebei was shut down amid public scandal and derision because it was exposed for having a collection of some forty thousand faked artefacts. The English Telegraph newspaper wryly reported:

> *"Wei Yingjun, the museum's chief consultant, conceded the museum did not have the proper provincial authorizations to operate but said he was "quite positive" that at least 80 of the museum's 40,000 objects had been confirmed as authentic."*[20]

Would we line up to see an exhibit of replicas of Tutankhamen's treasure, or a collection of fake paintings by Van Gogh, or forgeries of constitutional documents, or even fake Damien Hirst installations? Of course not! We want the real snake! (Or the real pickled shark). The great painter Odd Nerdrum has described a visit he made to an art gallery to see

a Rembrandt that he loved, only to find that it had been removed because a curator discovered it was a forgery. This painting, which on one day had been valued at millions of dollars, was valued at next to nothing on the very next day. But materially speaking the painting Odd admired is still the same painting – it has all the same qualities with the exception of its authentic authorship, without which it can no longer be part of the canon.

Even post-modernists demand authenticity, leaping through all sorts of hoops to insist upon the authorship of readymades, labelling cans of artist's pooh with certificates of authenticity and inscriptions to establish *bona fide* provenance. This insistence upon authenticity clearly indicates the way we assign value to works of art – it trumps everything else about art. We want to believe that certain people have a gift for making art that is so outstanding that it radiates from the works they make. We adore outstanding people, whether they are superlative athletes, or dynamic speakers, or skillful artists. When authenticity is shattered by the discovery that a fake had been agreed upon as the real thing, the fake must immediately be hidden away, or the cultural focus on exceptional individuals as leaders falls apart, and everyone is equal. Plagiarists are shamed; frauds, shams and impostors are exposed and fined, even when they fake Damien Hirst's mass-produced spot paintings; the reproductions of the workshops of the city of Dafen are the cause of consternation among painters; superstar cyclists are excoriated when they are revealed as drug-taking cheats.

This desire for authenticity is antithetical to the money dominated postmodern art world, in which those who purchase art are manipulated by cynical artists and dealers who exploit socialist pretensions but luxuriate in the benefits of a rampant, unregulated free market capitalism. Postmodernists are opposed to the idea of creative genius, devaluing it in their aesthetic theory, like Joseph Beuys, who despite showing signs of his own individual brilliance, loudly and repeatedly claimed, in pursuit of his socialist idealism, that "EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST"[21] (the capital letters are Beuys', not mine, he lived before capital letters were equated with shouting). But what distinguishes Beuys from the mass of second-rate installation makers of his time is precisely that Beuys, like all great leaders, was an unusually gifted individual who was able to capture expressions of consciousness that were recognized and shared by large numbers of people. Every human being may have the potential to be an artist, but may be a bad, good or indifferent artist, as Duchamp knew. Beuys' vocation, shared by all professional exhibitors, is "*to incarnate this un-actualized potential*",[22] that is, to take on the role of sharing powerful expressions of consciousness.

For all the *metas*, *hypers* and *digis*, the flopping, slippery combinations of labels and hyphenations, rising and falling in and out of art-speak like over-crowded fish in a tank at the market, so far the efforts to name 21st century Western culture point to nothing more than variations on postmodernity as defined by the French writers Lyotard and Baudrillard. The sight of thinkers inelegantly casting around for a name for whatever fish flops out to follow the flagging postmodern stream into the doldrums reveals the enduring need for narrative among the very people who would claim to be freed of it. Why would we seek an historical narrative that leads beyond the end of postmodernity, while simultaneously accepting Lyotard's definition of the postmodern condition as a rejection of narrative? In other words, the identification of the cultural traits that follow postmodernity cannot come from thinkers who work within the limitations of its ideology and mindset, cannot come from postmodern thinkers. Such a search requires evolutionary thinking that accepts the legitimacy of historical and philosophical meta-narratives defended by science.

One of the errors of many 20th century artists was to indulge the anthropological post-modern analysis of writers like Adorno as if it were a worthwhile ideology. Although post-modern writers correctly identified many of the features of 20th century culture, observing the existential problems of life after two world wars, including the dehumanization caused by empiricism and the disintegration of the old order, their handwringing did not offer positive solutions for the future, but instead emphasized dystopian negativity. What they reflected was the confusion and disintegration of the ideas that drove modernity since the early 17th century. We don't need to dwell much longer on the failings of postmodernity, because enough time has been spent polishing the brass on that sinking ship, which served well to identify the period of disorganization at the end of an era, but not to identify the characteristics of what will follow it. By now, the unsinkable postmodern Titanic is holed, filling with water and inevitably on it's way to the bottom of the ideological ocean to join feudalism, monarchy, totalitarianism and the other dark wrecks that lie half-buried in the muddy strata of history.

Stephen Hicks has summarized the lessons of Postmodernity like this:

> *"From Kierkegaard and Heidegger, we learn that our emotional core is a deep sense of dread and guilt. From Marx we feel a deep sense of alienation, victimization, and rage. From Nietzsche, we discover a deep need for power. From Freud, we uncover the urgings of dark and aggressive sexuality. Rage, power, guilt, lust, and dread constitute the center of the postmodern emotional universe."*[23]

Emergence refutes them. The positive evolution of individual minds, expressing ideas in materiality, thus adding to the flow of shared ideas, constitutes the cultural core of complexity and emergence. There's no need for postmodern alienation when we recognize that although we are individuals we are all participants in a collective cultural consciousness; no need to desire ultimate power when we realize that collective action gives authority to democratic choice, but collapses upon itself when it isn't supported by the elements that make its emergence possible; when the expectation of complexity is that evolutionary collective consciousness builds upon combinations of experiences to create new emergent forms, offering a future filled with promising possibilities, should we choose to pursue them. We have seen the outcome of Nietzsche's supermen, and have no wish to follow that line toward tyranny and totalitarianism again. As for Freud's dark and aggressive sexuality, the idealism of complexity is found in the unity of body and mind, replacing an internal power struggle between id and ego with an alchemical harmony between male and female, in which the child is seen as the emergent outcome of two blended consciousness; their union as the ultimate expression of the emergent experience.

Perhaps the enthusiasm for nostalgia we felt in the 20th century can be attributed to the enormous collective cultural loss of the world wars. We mourn the loss of the artifacts of the past, not necessarily because the past was better, but because we so highly value the expressions of consciousness our ancestors made as elements of the complexity from which contemporary culture is always emerging. The value we place on old master works, and the extravagant protective measures we go to in order to ensure their safe preservation is directly connected to our neurological association of skill, beauty and value. We preserve these things because they are elements of our collective cultural mind. Because material works of art are less fragile in the face of time than human consciousness, works of art are the enduring record of the truth we perceive as individuals - such shared experiences are fundamental to art-making.

In the 2003 re-edition of her book *The Politics of Postmodernism* the influential Canadian author Linda Hutcheon appealed to the art world for a naming of the new culture of the 21st century. Recognizing the end of postmodernity she said:

> *"The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on - as do those of modernism – in our contemporary twenty-first century world. Literary historical categories like modernism and postmodernism are after all*

> *only heuristic labels that we create in our attempts to chart cultural changes and continuities. Post-postmodernism needs a new challenge of its own, and I conclude therefore with this challenge to readers to find it – and name it for the twenty-first century."* [24]

Robert Laughlin has responded - bringing the relief of fresh air to the discussion, which had become weary after too long a time buzzing and banging against sealed windows in the dusty back rooms of the academy - by characterizing the continuing movement away from reductionism as *the age of emergence*.[25] The challenge to cultural commentators in the 21st century is to create aesthetics that fit what we now know about human consciousness.

Notes

[1] Ian McEwen, *Enduring Love* (Vintage, 1998), 71

[2] *"The lesson of the ugliest forms of modern art and architecture – they do not show reality, but take revenge on it, spoiling what might have been a home and leaving us to wander un-consoled and alienated in a spiritual desert."* Roger Scruton, *Why Beauty Matters,* (BBC Video, 2009)

[3] *"After the demise of idealistic systems, the difficulty of an aesthetics that would be more than a desperately re-animated branch of philosophy is that of bringing the artist's closeness to the phenomena into conjunction with a conceptual capacity free of any subordinating concept, free of all old decreed judgments; committed to the medium of concepts, such an aesthetics would go beyond a mere phenomenology of artworks."* Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Continuum, 1997), 424

[4] *"The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation."* Theodore Adorno, *Prisms*, trans: Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (MIT Press, 1983), 34

[5] John McCrae, "In Flanders Fields" in *Punch,* (8th December 1915)

> *In Flanders Fields the poppies blow*
> *Between the crosses row on row,*
> *That mark our place; and in the sky*
> *The larks, still bravely singing, fly*
> *Scarce heard amid the guns below.*