After the Future: Inhabiting Apathy in New Media Arts

Sean Cubitt and Arron Santry
VCS special issue

ABSTRACT
"Media arts" is a phrase that has circulated for a century now, dealing with electromechanical media (radio, film, rotary press, photography) and more recently with electronic media (video, electronic music, digital arts). With benefit of hindsight it became doctrine that all forms of art were media (Greenberg's and McLuhan's different historical versions of medium specificity); that all media were digital (Kittler) and – in what may well be the hegemonic idea of the 21st century – that all human activity, even all ecological activity, has always been fundamentally communicative; that we have been able to conceive of an aesthetic without medium. No matter that the substitute – the concept, especially in anti-retinal art – is in many respects a discrete medium embedded in the entrails of late 20th century theories of language.

This article first proposes this diagnosis, then sets out to decipher why the contradictions of art and technology, and more broadly of science and the social, have brought us to this conjuncture, and what kind of opportunity it presents for the (re)making of both arts and media.
(175 words)

CONTACT: School of Culture and Communication
W104 John Medley Building
University of Melbourne
Grattan Street
Victoria 3010
AUSTRALIA
+61 (0)3 8344 1368
scubitt@unimelb.edu.au

CONTRIBUTOR:
Sean Cubitt is Professor of Screen Studies at the University of Melbourne. His publications include *The Cinema Effect, EcoMedia, The Practice of Light, Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies* and *Anecdotal Evidence: Ecocritique from Hollywood to the Mass Image*. Co-editor of *Ecocinema: Theory and Practice* and *Ecomedia: Key Issues*. and series editor for Leonardo Books at MIT Press, he researches the history and philosophy of media, ecopolitical aesthetics, media arts and technologies and media art history.

Arron Santry is a PhD candidate in Media, Communications, and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London. His research explores the connections between the use of digital technology in artists' moving image and broader cultures of digitality, with a particular interest in art's resistance to technological control.

After the Future: Inhabiting Apathy in New Media Arts

Apathy, not despair, is the opposite of hope today. "Apathy" describes a condition, a quality of living, the negative of other forms of fellow feeling (empathy, sympathy). Apathy, today, is not a retreat into selfish isolation but the absence of feeling, especially those feelings that propel us to action. Apathy is incapacity for action. It recognises no future because it is the offspring of the eternal present produced by the triumph of information capital and financialisation, an argument worked through in a book I am currently working on. Rather than trace the origins of apathy, this paper investigates how some recent new media artworks manage to emerge from and address this condition. First, however, the condition itself needs to be outlined.

Contemporary apathy is a state of the soul that demonstrates how much the soul, as it already appeared to WEB DuBois (1961), is a collective reality, not the protected and protective inwardness of an individual, nor indeed the particular character of a racialised group as it was for DuBois. Apathy does not describe the incapacitated state of those (like the inmates of the nazi camps described by Primo Levi[1]) who have already survived the worst and entered the time beyond history and therefore beyond action. Nor does it describe the state of those bludgeoned into automatism by the sure and certain knowledge that nothing they can do will make any difference to the blind unfolding of destiny. Apathy is a banal, everyday emptiness. It is not so much that action can achieve nothing, or even that nothing matters – it is neither fatalism nor nihilism – but a sense that action that intends change is no longer capable of effecting it. It is not a psychological affliction but a social condition, articulated in and articulating the absence of friction in computational being, the smoothening of the sharp edges of social control which used to allow us to know – as so many others still know – suffering.

We can only understand what this implies for contemporary culture by seeking out its cultural symptoms and sites of resistance. There are creative reactions to this condition – social and cultural – that emerge as theories, which I set aside for the current essay. There are also cultural practices, some claiming the status of art. They fall broadly into categories of practice that accept the current state of affairs as the reality we have been given, and that work with it. A second kind of practice seeks escape. A third seeks to reveal the truth of this condition, specifically by revealing how it operates as a social-technical instrument. This third kind, the hardest to identify, seeks out something beyond the present that apathy finds itself trapped in. No one of these types of practice is

[1] P. Levi, *If This is a Man/The Truce*. tr. Stuart J Wolfe, Little Brown, London, 1988.

"bad". Each expresses an honest relation to what remains possible, what ambition is still worthwhile.

Apathy need not be glum. In England in the late 2000s and early 2010s, you could see everywhere mugs, posters and cards with variations on the motto "Keep Calm and Carry On", a cheery appeal, deliberately citing the design and font of public service messages during the bombing of London in the 1940s. Calling up the even tempered, jokey Blitz spirit once required to survive the trauma of bombing, the chipper slogan now served as a meme for surviving the banality of the everyday. Carrying on, continuing to perform the necessary tasks, and doing so with good humour, is not action – oriented towards changing the world, either for personal reasons or to effect political change – but activity. It is a righteous and admirable response to the failure of meaning. The most widespread symptom in the media arts is social media photography, not inaction or isolated individualism but activity – careless and cheerful sharing, knowing that the interpersonal intent actually succumbs to vast corporate databases. That knowing quality, its "Keep Calm and Carry On" ironic stance towards its pointlessness and subordination, is its own form of resistance even as it is subsumed into the requirements of the new colonisation of emotion ("affect") by information capital. Apathetic activity – in particular creative activity, which is what most of the production of social media content sincerely or ironically aspires to be – is what maintains the subjective experience of post-digital life, even if at its bare minimum that life consists only of scrolling and swiping. The resistance immanent to non-commercial social media activity is the introduction of friction, the deceleration of the recursive processes of digital production and consumption; it is small-town news stories about viral videos, group-chat screenshots of memes, appearances on *Ellen* or *The Wendy Williams Show*.

Among new media artists, Beeple's now notorious *Everydays* project (2007-) can be read as an exemplary form of activity circumventing older (ethical, political) aesthetic claims for art as action or event or encounter. Making a new work every day is work, in the model of the disciplined factory labour first described by Marx[2] in the 1860s. Beeple says on his site – beeple-crap.com – that "he makes a variety of art crap across a variety of media. some of it is okay, but a lot of it kind of blows ass. he's working on making it suck less everyday". Linking through to the *Everydays* project we read "The purpose of this project is to help me get better at different things", giving as an

[2] K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1. tr. by Ben Fowkes, NLB/Penguin, London 1976, pp. 544-553.

example “This year I'll be doing a render everyday using Cinema 4D and mostly Octane, instead of trying to learn new software, will be focusing on some of the fundamentals like color, composition, value etc”[3] (original orthography). The discipline of working every day, not to produce a finished product but to persevere in trying to become more skilful in using specific commercial software packages, has two incommensurable but synchronous messages. First, to work everyday producing something is at the very least an imitation, but more closely a performance of the work that capital demands of the disciplined labourer. A possible reading would be that Beeple is striving towards the point where he can subordinate himself entirely to the software he uses, devoting himself to realising its potential rather than his own. But second, it is also a work of perfecting individual skills and creativity of the kind that Foucault was thinking of when he described the “entrepreneur of the self … being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer”[4]. Foucault moves swiftly to note the proximity of these forms of production to the then-new stakes of consumption (the lectures cited come from 1978-9), stakes that are all the clearer in the twenty-first century. When you consume software you produce software artefacts: and the pleasure comes as much from learning to consume-produce as it does from the things you make. Beeple’s *Everydays* are in this sense exemplary of the discipline, not of the factory, but of consumption at a time when it has become central to the new reproduction and expansion of capital.

As John Roberts[5] highlights, the artist’s acquisition of skill(s) no longer transcends – if it ever truly did – the social and technical division of labour in capitalist society. The technical specificity with which Beeple approaches the task of “sucking less” is a consequence of the systematic deskilling of labour which externalises manual skill and *savoir-faire* as technology. The suites of software used by artists like Beeple automate with increasing ease and efficiency the labour- and capital-intensive processes of rendering digital images. Every patch and update congeals a little more labour, skill, and knowledge as computer code. The process of deskilling has, over the past several centuries, left workers bereft of the “all-round” skills of the artisan and replaced them with forms of dexterity related to the management of machines. The return of this congealed subjectivity, this technology,

[3] Beeple, *beeple-crap.com*, 2021 [accessed 29 August 2021].

[4] M. Foucault (2008), *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, ed by M. Senellart, tr. by G Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, p. 226.

[5] J. Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade*, Verso, London 2007

to the sphere of art raises the question of what happens when artists consume materials. One answer to this question simply makes artists vanguards of the expansion of capital; their innovative and imaginative use of technology prepares new methods and materials to be subsumed, or, put another way, the dialectic of the mastery of the artist over their materials and the dialectic of the mastery of capital over nature coincide. Yet Roberts also proposes that the free and subjective labour of the artist rescues their materials from the grip of capital and turns them towards a kind of autonomy capable of unleashing the congealed subjectivity of generations of workers towards non-dominating ends. Beeple's everyday efforts to keep pace at the cutting edge of graphics software do not clearly fall on either side of this dialectic between heteronomy and autonomy, but the aesthetic category of "art crap" points towards a desire to break out of the productive sphere and to pursue other ends, even if – limited by apathy – those ends might fall short of art's utopian promise.

Beeple's is also a practice of the everyday when the difference between days is minimal in the apathetic optic: an embroidery of images over the void of pointlessness. As clever and witty as Beeple's ironic submission to the new conditions of exploitation is, it is also worth noting his self-deprecating language, much of it expressed in the language of defecation. The reference to shit evokes Piero Manzoni's infamous *Merda d'artista* of 1961: a limited edition of cans purportedly each containing thirty grams of the artist's shit, and further back the grandfather of neo-conceptual art, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* of 1912, a urinal laid on its side and signed "R. Mutt". One of Duchamp's first forays into "post-retinal" art, the *Fountain* was not so much to be seen as to be puzzled over: Is any old thing art? Is art any old thing? The lavatory as binary pair of the privileged artwork depends on a system which consistently marks excreta as dirt, "matter in the wrong place", as Mary Douglas defined it, noting "As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder ... Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment"[6]. The rhythm of Beeple's production, and his claim that any individual image is worthless, suggests then that each product is an excretion and their regularity not that of the factory but of bowel movements. The actual art would then be not the visual images but the process of "getting better", indeed of calmly carrying on. Collectively, these ima object itself ges are, to take his declaration literally, a pile of shit. At the same time, however, he already mobilises the contradictions of Manzoni and Duchamp with his term "art crap", and so places his excretions in a distinctive aesthetic impasse constitutive

[6] M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo.*, Routledge, London 1966, p. 2.

of contemporary (as opposed to modernist) art[7] (cf Smith 2009). The co-presence of the highest and lowest values *is* an aesthetic statement, an artwork, even as the artist's labour becomes the significant value, rather than the objects it produces – rather in the way that Duchamp's selection of the readymade vitreous enamel is more significant than the object itself[8]. At the same time, these devalued objects function at the threshold between system (for example but not exclusively the art-system) and its exterior. The fact that Beeple exhibits these cast-offs on his site and elsewhere maintains their ambiguity, somewhere between artistic statements and the oily rags cast on the studio floor as the painter struggles to achieve the perfect canvas. Their ambivalence – literally their double value – knowingly, even wittily, and certainly ironically, undermines the coherence of the work the art system does of organising the environment by separating art from non-art.

Emphasising making over made and acquisition of skill over its exhibition, *Everydays* places productive consumption at the threshold between art and its other, creating an ambiguity in the phrase "work of art" between the worked object to be valued aesthetically and the labour of producing not only objects but oneself. The oddity of the artwork, in both potential meanings, is that it takes place in public, offers itself to the public, is an exhibit or performance that comes into a social world which alone can give product or performance significance, since significance does not inhere in the work. Douglas insisted that dirt's definition depends on its beholder, but so too does the aesthetic, semantic significance of a system or work, and equally the recognition of those boundaries that constitute a system through exclusion, and therefore the significance of activities that make that boundary permeable or tear it open. This is activity without action. It does not attempt to break the art system. Its ambition is to show, with good humour, the fragility as well as the power of a system on whose margins it operates. Its success derives from the detail of the relation between consumption and production in working with software packages, allowing that to permeate too the iconography of the daily pieces: ironic, often dark parodies of pop-cultural iconography from cartoons to Donald Trump, all reduced to the same level of caricature, glossy (in recent years) like the shiniest of industrial commodities, and as prone to an absolute democracy founded on the relentless truth of exchange value: that everything is equivalent to everything else on the level terrain of cash transactions. Like Warhol and Koons, Beeple's imagery is a droll

[7] cfr. T. Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2009.

[8] J. Roberts, op. cit.

commentary on the commodity status of art that nonetheless – and here we move to the most famous aspect of his work – rejoices in exactly the commodity status it seems to parody.

Domenico Quaranta and Ashley Wong in this issue have provided detailed commentary on the now notorious auction of Beeple's work. Here I merely wish to add an inflection: that the sale of *Everydays* established the ambivalent "work" (labour, product) in a terrain where other markers of success, such as Beeple's commissions for Calvin Klein and Justin Bieber, have been sidelined in the production of the sale as news event. If as we have been suggesting Beeple's practice draws on an anti-aesthetic tradition in contemporary art, one that sutures the otherwise disparate fields of pop and high culture among other binaries, then the production of art event as meme is a particularly witty demonstration of the importance of activity, rather than action, as a cultural practice. Activity is not a goal, but a survival technique. In the dying embers of the cultural era of the "post", especially after postmodernism gave way to the contemporary as dominant cultural category, screen and audio media permeate biennials, and the once warring factions of Mainstream Contemporary Art and New Media Arts[9] have made their uneasy peace. This reconciliation has taken place as the significance of medium-specificity, once a touchstone of modernist aesthetics, dissolves. To a great extent all contemporary art deals with the ubiquity of digital communications, which have lost their distinctive gloss as they have sunk into the infrastructure of everything we do, into, in fact, the "everyday" that Beeple's title recalls. This disappearance of digitality as a specific concern as it becomes instead the increasingly invisible support of the contemporary condition coincides with the socio-cultural condition outlined above, a condition of perpetual and indifferent, albeit often ironic activity. In this new landscape of incessant but directionless activity, we have lost the power of hindsight. Even stranger, in the contemporary we have lost the capacity for foresight, the turn towards posterity that emboldened so many avant-gardes. We neither expect the future to redeem us, nor demand that we should redeem the past. It is as if the future that once powered the media arts has already passed, and we ramble through its ruins lacking both nostalgia (which in any case dissolved in the pastiches of peak postmodernism) and the revolutionary yearnings, spiritual and temporal, of the modernist avant-garde. The Christie's auction (and the rumours circulating around it) is just another occurrence, one that lifts the veil of indifference only long enough to reveal that wealth is the naughty secret of art, a secret which everyone has always known.

[9] E.A. Shanken, *Contemporary Art and New Media: Digital Divide or Hybrid Discourse?* in C. Paul, (ed.) *A Companion to Digital Art*, Wiley-Blackwell, New York 2016, pp. 463-481.

Tabor Robak's recent work is of another order, and allows us to think through another set of responses to the current situation, a situation that may be catastrophic, but which nonetheless seems incapable of drawing itself up into a crisis. Robak's *Megafauna* (2020) commissioned for the NGV Triennial in Melbourne (and acquired by the gallery) is a large scale interactive installation featuring elaborately detailed animated 3D creations ("Magi") moving through darkness in a multi-channel projection system[10]. The Triennial website (NGV 2020) observes that these magi derive, visually, "from micro-biology, advanced robotics, data storage, and sacred iconography" and from several of the domains most closely associated with the development of artificial intelligence: "geoimaging and cartography, military science and weaponisation, banking and healthcare". Unlike Beeple, who has several short films on his site critical of US military spending and the mortgage crisis among other issues, Robak is not visibly critical of any of the practices that give him inspiration for the creatures he displays. Though they may draw on biology and technology, especially their syntheses in scientific visualisations, there is little sense that these are anything but abstract figures, leading the NGV's writer to describe the effect of the installation as "like a sacred space or a monument".

The description is informative. This is a light projection, not a monument, unless we were to think of ephemeral events like Albert Speer's searchlight columns at the Nuremberg rallies as monumental (and there is no question of Robak's installation having any totalitarian effects like those Speer aimed for). Yet it might call up a sacred space, a space that might involve monumentality like a temple or a mosque, the latter perhaps particularly because of its abstraction. Robak is known for hyper-realist renders, often of ordinary objects heightened by their immaculate sheen to the level of abstractions which, even though we are always aware that they are digitally produced and therefore hollow surfaces, can ascend towards the kind of spiritual abstraction that Kandinsky (1977) and van Doesburg (1968) wrote of in the early years of abstract art. Unlike Beeple's self-constructed persona as humble seeker after skill, Robak is renowned for his consummate artistry. The abstraction is less an abstraction *from* sources in the technological industries, more an escape *into* a world apart from them. There is too a wilful anonymity about the installation of *Megafauna* that perhaps comes from precisely this virtuoso programming, one that lifts the work out of the last references to social media or indeed the social world and into a realm where pure forms, freed of the Platonic task of grounding reality, evolve according to their own other-than-human logic. What intelligence they have, and it feels impressive, is the intelligence of a

[10] https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/virtual-tours/triennial-2020-tabor/

cherry pit that knows to grow into a cherry tree, both precise and malleable according to the conditions it encounters, here the interaction with spectators entering the viewing space. Even so, the intelligence of these artefacts is impersonal, and to that extent sacred. It would be incorrect however to think of them as in any way, individually or collectively, sublime. There is no holy awe, no trauma, because there is no encounter. An angel manifesting in the sublunary world is an occasion of dread: these are moments of wonder – not least that someone can call them into existence – but because they are called, they lack the terror that marks the sublime for aesthetic philosophers.

Instead, they merely evoke the sublime, recalling or re-membering rather than embodying it. The copywriter's line is precise: they are *like* sacred spaces without actually being sacred in the way your eyes may be *like* stars but are not actually distant balls of superheated gases fuelled by nuclear fusion. This is the clue to the magis' charm, as much as the cycles of animation they run through, a kind of pulse that is like life without being alive. It is these similes that make the work so true to the contemporary moment, not because they describe it but because they escape from it through the alibi of likeness. They live, but not in our time. In some ways they seem to figure out a future through the science-fiction images they also draw on, but the future they elicit is a memory of the future as it has been depicted, somewhere in the history that bridges the Eisenhower-era consumer fantasy of *Forbidden Planet* (Fred Wilcox, 1957) and the retro-futurism of *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), a futurism of Detroit built-in obsolescence and chromium fins, the future that disappeared in the design of parodic SF films like *Mars Attacks!* (Tim Burton 1996) and *Earth Girls are Easy* (Julian Temple, 1988) when postmodernism became post-futurism. Such self-parodic futurism was already apparent as far back as *Barbarella* (Roger Vadim, 1968), showing just how long it has been since the future began to dissolve under the contradiction of capital's ability to dangle indefinitely prolonged progress and its incapacity to deliver anything other than more of the same.

The particular fate of the future in the twenty-first century has been to lose anything but its ability to disappear, like Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat, leaving nothing behind but its smile. This anti-futurism can be mild, as here, or violent, as it is in the triumph of debt and its effects on the sub-prime mortgage market. It is not just that most of us expect to be in debt throughout our lives, but that debt is money from the future we have spent today, so that a loan is a promise to keep doing what we are doing long enough to keep paying the interest on debts we have no ability and therefore no intention to pay back. Indeed, banks bank on the expectation that we will never pay back the

principle: that we will keep servicing the debt in perpetuity. The very language of "servicing" reveals the inhumanity of the relation, but also that it is designed to be unending, uninterested in the permanently-deferred moment when the mortgage will be paid off.

Debt is the violent face of the perpetual present which is capital's home because the present is the only time that profit can exist. If apathetic activity is its most widespread cultural form, escape is its most generous mode of release. The escape offered by immersion in Robak's fantasia is real enough. In place of dreaming of a future, it offers an elsewhere. Better still, it is in a technical sense a fantasy, in the terms explored in Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten" (1979) where the psychoanalyst demonstrates that the characteristic of fantasy is to be able to occupy multiple positions in an ambiguous scenario simultaneously: to be male-female and passive-active, and to experience pain-pleasure, permission and revolt all at once and in succession in wondrously knotted Moebius strips. The fantastic creations of Robak's world are biological and mechanical in form, visual and tactile in experience, objective presences and immersive experience, all at once, and in succession, inviting us to plunge into an endlessly fascinating round of activities that mimic and expand the realm of erotic and artistic fantasy, none of which ever touch the ground, just as debt-servicing enters a fantastic treadmill of payments without ever touching the foundational lump sum that its circulations are based on.

Robak's shimmering artefacts have the glamour of fantasy, casting a consumerist spell where there is nothing to purchase, freeing consumption of the burden of turning production into consumption, in the relation explored above in Beeple's disciplined consumerism. Likewise there is no entrepreneurial improvement of the self to enter into: these are transparently empty creations, without signification or grand claims to meaning or historical purpose. Pure entertainment, they float apart from the economies they draw on as investment, design inspiration and formal structure. The meaning of escape, in the apathetic society, is not to leave it behind but to discover ways of inhabiting, with pleasure, interstices where its functioning can be experienced as abstract play of forms, colours and light, visibly coded, fictionally autonomous, vehicles of a delight that no longer needs the alibi of moral or political uplift to ratify its enjoyment. Vilém Flusser's[11] concept of "envisioning" gives a clearer picture of this practice of escape: creative activity that probes for meaning and information in the pre-fixed outcomes of an apparatus. If apathetic activity amounts to

[11] V. Flusser, Vilém *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2011.

the incremental realisation of some predetermined program (say, the capture of every possible photographic image one snap at a time), then the escapist play that Robak's work makes possible pushes against the limits of the program. It is not that Robak reprograms the apparatus or redistributes its field of possibilities, but that by inhabiting and allowing viewers to inhabit an aesthetic site which – whether fictionally or not – sets itself apart from society, Robak warps the probability field of the apathetic society like a black hole warps space and time. What makes this work effective is that the affects and percepts of the apathetic society – the frictionlessness and flatness of affect – bind the formal reality of the work to the external reality from which it offers an escape. Robak's abstractions transcend the everyday by imitating it in its most formal aspects, perhaps most of all the continuum of change without direction.

Something similar might be said of Refik Anadol's huge multiscreen work *Quantum Memories*[12] installed in the entrance hall of the same NGV Triennial. On a square LED screen ten metres on each edge and 2.5 metres deep, *Quantum Memories* deploys Google's AI Laboratory algorithms to process two hundred million nature and landscape images derived from Google users to produce immersive abstractions and soundscapes. As his website explains, the work uses "quantum computation research data and algorithms ... to speculate alternative modalities inside the most sophisticated computer available, and create new quantum noise-generated datasets as building blocks of these modalities" (Anadol 2021). The application of quantum computing to quantum-based algorithms appears on-screen as punctuations in the abstract forms, filling the screen with real-time data visualisations of the processing before bursting back into the hero animations and their apparent 3D rendering. As Bleeker and colleagues[13] note of some earlier works by Anadol using related toolsets, "These animated visualization techniques do not make the data legible as such; it does not invite a distillation of information, but rather awe from these spectacular and also enigmatic visuals". That sense of awe is only increased by the staging of *Quantum Memories* at scale but also in an interior (other recent Anadol works have been installed as exterior projections on buildings, so anchored to architectural scale: these are animated as if on a vast canvas – an appropriate form for a gallery venue – that overshadows its human visitors). Scale, the numbers of source materials involved, and the mysterious, not to say magical properties of the technology,

[12] R. Anadol, *https://refikanadol.com/works/quantummemories/* [accessed 31 August 2021].

[13] M. Bleeker, N. Verhoeff and S. Werning (2020). *Sensing data: Encountering data sonifications, materializations, and interactives as knowledge objects*, in "Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies" v. 26, n. 5-6, 2020, pp. 1088-1107.

which is, as Arthur C. Clarke might have observed, sufficiently advanced to appear as magic, all contribute to what might in other circumstances gravitate towards the sublime.

Yet the reach towards the sublime is undercut, in part because the tasteful renderings of the processing as coloured waves of light and mass are in themselves rather beautiful, and do not really produce those sensations of terror that Kant[14] and his successors found essential to distinguish human-artificial beauty from natural-spiritual sublime. In addition, the abstract animations are regularly interrupted with periods when the underlying computation is brought up to fill the whole screen array with subsidiary frames where code and visualisations (some documented at the artist's website) play out or enact the infrastructure of computation, suggesting that what is on display is not only the animations and accompanying sound as end-products but, by analogy with Beeple's *Everydays* process, the work of generating them. Here we can see a significant operation at the level of apathy – which I reiterate is a social condition, therefore also an aesthetic condition, and thus also a condition among others of the operation of technologies, especially where they work in combination with humans, both donors of raw materials and scientist-artist workers who collaborate with it.

The sheer number of raw landscapes uploaded makes it impossible to analyse what characteristics they share, other than that those we glimpse at the start of each iteration indicate that they are largely what might be called banal touristic shots. Undoubtedly there will be exceptions to the rule, but the majority I have been able to glance at broadly enact existing indicators of good taste in framing and lighting, and many appear to be of landscapes that have some cultural value. As Adorno[15] observed "Natural beauty [rather than landscape art or photographs] purportedly ahistorical, is at its core historical". Landscapes are emblems of nation, of political struggles; they hold the bones of the dead and the dreams of settlers, and even science proposes, along with its structured understandings of geology and ecology, some sense of the pristine, a word we almost never use unless in conjuncture with the word "landscape". The raw landscape images are then far from raw: they are, in Lévi-Strauss's[16] partition, already cooked. A collection of user landscape images might well tell us about what constitutes "landscape" at a particular moment (like Erika

[14] I. Kant,(2000), Second Book: Analytic of the Sublime, in Id. *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. by P. Guyer, tr. by P. Guyer and E. Matthews, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 128-159

[15] T.Adorno (1997), *Aesthetic Theory*, tr by R Hulot-Kentor. Athlone Press, London, p. 65

[16] C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (*Introduction to a Science of Mythology* v. 1), tr. by J. Weightman, and D. Weightman, Harper and Row, New York 1969.

Tan's *The Syntactical Impossibility of Approaching with a Pure Heart* [2008], an animated collection of mountain views) or about the state of human understanding and care for land, seated in romantic, scholarly or historical notions, at the scale of family memory or of geological time. That is not however what we are invited to see. Lifted from the interpersonal postings that motivate their arrival online, sifted and classified for storage and processed again in their selection and preparation for this work, the photos lose all their histories. They shed the memories, cultures and formations of taste that shaped them and made them meaningful at the same time that they lost their authorship and histories of sharing and showing. We are witness to the conversion of cultural materials into raw material.

The parallel with the seizure of indigenous lands, thickly interwoven with cultural meanings, to convert it into mines and fields is significant only because that too is assimilated into the data stream that the device processes. No doubt some, perhaps many of the images came from campaigning groups: that no longer signifies. Anadol's work instead demonstrates what now exists, after history, after affect: the real-time generation of outputs from data. As Shannon was at pains to make a founding hypothesis of communications engineering, information has nothing to do with meaning or significance, only with transferring signal efficiently from A to B. The creative component of Anadol's installation, and what is made clear by the interruptions of code and data visualisations, is an intervention at the level of efficiency. Ten or fifteen years ago, interruption of signal was seen as, among other things, the irruption of noise that endangered the coherence of any system, a demonstration of systemic fallibility and incompletion (evidence of a resistant exterior or environment refusing to be assimilated), and evidence of the medium-specificity of electronic and in certain circumstances mechanical media. Today, as leading glitch artist and theorist Rosa Menkman notes,

> Not all glitch art is progressive or something new. The popularization and cultivation of the avant-garde of mishaps has become predestined and unavoidable. Be aware of easily reproducible glitch effects, automated by softwares and plug-ins. What is now a glitch will become a fashion[17].

[17] R. Menkman, *Glitch Studies Manifesto*, in G. Lovink, R. Somers Miles (eds), *Video Vortex 2: Moving Images Beyond YouTube*, Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam, p. 336.

In the intervening decade it has become clear that glitches such as the code interruptions in *Quantum Memories* are integral to the work. Generally, glitches are no longer noise but symptoms of noise, symptoms recuperated as symbols, symbols that function as signals: they are no longer evidence of an outside but of the colonial embrace of data systems which now draw in glitches as evidence of their own authenticity. In Anadol's case, however, it is possible to find an aesthetic response to this, which arrives through one of the least-prized aspects of glitch theory c.2011 (perhaps because it belongs to an outmoded modernist aesthetic): that glitches assert the medium-specificity of electro-mechanical media.

In certain respects, Beeple's devotion to a daily practice belongs to an older order of work, based on human labour, even grounded in biological rhythms. When Anadol pulls back the curtain to reveal the artificial wizard pulling the strings, he is acknowledging that human labour is not the most significant aspect of contemporary production. Users supply vast numbers of images, but they are images uploaded for all sorts of other purposes, notably to concretise interpersonal relations. Here however those emotional intentions are stripped out of the images, which are mined for their formal properties (that they match the metatags of "landscape" and "nature"), and their human uploaders and their intentions treated, as they must be in their industrial capture and storage in databases, as raw materials. Those are not the processes of interest to the work of *Quantum Memories*. This historically new condition – where human creativity becomes a resource to be extracted – marks a movement in capital from territorial expansion and enclosure of indigenous land to intellectual expansion and enclosure of the intellectual commons. While it benefits from this enclosure, *Quantum Memories* cannot be reduced to propaganda for Google and information capital more broadly. In the arena of spectacular entertainment, it puts into operation a different aesthetic than Robak's glamorous inhabitation of the eternal present.

The particular quantum aesthetic that Anadol puts in play is the "many worlds interpretation" of quantum uncertainty, which holds that the best explanation of otherwise inexplicable quantum phenomena like action at a distance, entanglement, phantoms and uncertainty itself is the hypothesis that there exist simultaneously many worlds, of which ours is only one. The animated displays then are, in Anadol's terms, a computer dreaming of alternative worlds. This is one utopian dimension to the work, though it contains within it the dystopian premise that the computer can dream into being new realities – new raw materials – to be subsumed by information capital; that the grip of digital control may extend not only as far as what really exists, but to what *may* exist. As with the work of Robak, what Anadol reveals is a "quantum" warping of the possibilities of the computer apparatus,

which are no longer conceived as a field of discrete locations in a probability space (as Flusser originally described them). Instead, the computer processing Anadol deploys gives rise to "uncertain" outcomes. The fuzzy logic of dreams coincides with the fuzzy logic of computing, in which the Boolean true-false (1 or 0) binary is replaced by the infinite series of real numbers between 0 and 1. Where human dreaming is broadly conceived in terms of the psychic play of imagination or fantasy, however, computer dreaming is rigorously mathematical.

A second utopian dimension lies in the meticulous presentation of the work of the AI, at the margins of human comprehension not only because of its complexity but also its speed and scales, simultaneously immense and minuscule. The nesting of these worlds, like the nested fantasies observed above, sequential and simultaneous, mimic the multiple-worlds hypothesis *and are imitated by it*. The reveal is not just of a computer dreaming, but that dreaming as activity (1) is evidence that the program is so deeply inflected by its human interlocutors that it begins to exhibit symptoms of desire and (2) that its desire is in turn a symptom of repression.

We do not need Freud to assert that repression is the ordinary action of restricting and controlling instinct, of excluding nature not only externally as dirt but internally as uncontrolled emotion – emotion in the wrong place. This is not to say that glitches are the return of the repressed, as they appeared in earlier stages of glitch studies. On the contrary, the recuperation and assimilation of glitches into the aesthetic of the most advanced modes of AI computing is the occasion for machine dreams: not the exclusion and its symptoms, but the therapeutic process of living with those symptoms is what produces the anomalous structures where a machine intelligence is also capable of irrationality, precisely because noise has become not only a raw material but an integral part of its processing. What we are watching is not the triumphal march of cyborg intelligence, the acme of the perfected Market idealised by finance capital. No: what Anadol shows us is a klutz tripping over its own feet as it tries to drink up the toxins it had expelled in the effort to produce a pristine internal environment of pure data and pure signal. This is not a Marvel superhero movie: it is not even the prodigious equilibrium in the face of incompetence and accident that makes Chaplin's little clown so enduring a symbol of the human condition. For all its scale, grandeur, intelligence and beauty, this is a slapstick performance. This tension between total programming and hysterical improvisation is what makes this work work.

Google's image database is an example of the enclosure of the commons of the general intellect[18], (Marx 1973: 690-711; see also Virno 2007, Pasquinelli 2019). Just as no-one can speak without entering into the commons of a language – which is a social production that every speech act depends on and contributes to – no code is free: it depends on the legacy of maths and logic as well as the underpinnings of computational history, to which it contributes, but that precedes and continues before and after the act of coding. Quantum mechanics is no different, even though it comes wrapped in expertise, a hierophantic art. In the twenty-first century, however, there is a change in relations between general intellect and expertise, which is in the process of becoming an expert system. Marx describes the agglutination of knowledge and skills into factory machines: the skills of the weaver assimilated into the functioning of power looms that from then on stand over against the worker whose capabilities it now embodies. Today we face the same process in the arena of emotional intelligence. Our affective responses to social and network media, processed in the form of behaviours like swipes, likes and shares, is converted to data and applied to the development of AIs that, in theory and increasingly in practice, can respond to the evidence of emotion. No longer satisfied with the givens of geological, oceanic and agricultural resources, or with extracting the patterns of manual labour, relational databases and their intelligences abstract from human intercourse forms of culture, social and interpersonal, to place them over against the feeling, breathing beings that they have ben abstracted from. More than this, as Luciana Parisi[19] argues, the human subject itself is reconfigured in its interpellation by artificial intelligence, returning only at the end of this recursive cycle of abstraction as "an experiment in steering knowledge beyond what it already known"[20]. Looped into the processes of information capital in this way, the human being is compelled towards apathy, a fixed and frictionless state of computational being.

Under these conditions, Beeple's *Everydays*, Robak's *Megafauna* and Anadol's *Quantum Memories* set out to make work within the confines of the new emotional landscape formed in the aftermath of the new data harvest. They play upon the new polity of apathy as the instrument they have to hand, making complex, dynamic works that dramatise the contradictions of a present which today

[18] cfr. K. Marx, (1973). *Grundrisse.* tr. by M. Nicolaus, Penguin/New Left Books, London 1973, pp. 690-711; P. Virno, *General Intellect*, *Historical Materialism* v. 15, n. 3, 2007, pp. 3-8; M. Pasquinelli, *On the Origins of Marx's General Intellect*, in "Radical Philosophy" , issue 2.06, 2019, pp. 43-56.

[19] L. Parisi, *The alien subject of AI*, in "Subjectivity", v. 12, n. 1, 2019, pp. 27-48.

[20] Ivi, p. 29

stretches out in all directions, the real-time of processes without goals. Through their variations on capitalist realism, escape and glitch, they work at the level of one of our key political terms in the 2010s: sustainability. They instruct us on how to survive, in a world that is likely to sustain itself, even though we have yet to determine whether it is worth sustaining.

There remains the task of an art that re-situates the boundaries of the commons. These works, for good artistic, ethical and even political reasons operate inside the systems they query and parody. At much more local levels, there are emerging practices of commoning that begin outside the enclosures operated by informational capital. Many look less like art and more like social and economic experiments. All are vulnerable. Their vulnerability includes all the expected ones we know from the history that is now at once excluded and reduced to raw materials. The more successful the system, in terms of its ability to predict behaviours, the less it is capable of originality. The system needs human invention to produce the random numbers it can no longer generate on its own. The risk for every experiment is that it may become grist to the mill of capital. But we cannot go back to some pre-digital Eden: the news at time of writing is full of the fall of Kabul and the aftermath of Hurricane Ida, both of them showing in the broadest terms how devastating a life without digital infrastructures has become. The impulse to succumb therefore to the structures we have inherited is great: the principle of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" is a powerful one, especially when the global systems are so complex that not only no single human could comprehend it, but when even the sum of all humans could not match the speed and granular detail of the AIs we deploy.

And yet it is essential to think through what we have and what we want, against the grain of the apathetic present. Hope is only hope when it does not know what it wants, when it can be disappointed, and when it exceeds not only the individual but the collective of humanity. It has been clear for half a century that we can no longer think humanity apart from the planetary ecology. Equally, as these works show, we cannot think ourselves apart from our technologies. Our hope and its grounds, consideration of and for the non-human that permeates the human, are still to find their means of action. The new media arts are a privileged route beyond the complex of sustainable eco-techno-social activity, towards new modes of action, no longer tailored to planning the future – a colonial enclosure already effected by financialisation in ways that far exceed Stalinist five-year plans. It will not have escaped the reader who has made it so far that the three works discussed are all by men. The end of that privilege no longer depends on ending the human privilege but the technological; it demands a new mode of eco-cyborg after the cyborg corporation, those massed

databases with their human plug-ins. Only in that posthuman commons, built from the waste, the excluded noise, the unwanted gleanings after harvest, will it be possible for apathy to convert its resources into hope.

REFERENCES

Adorno, Theodor W (1997). *Aesthetic Theory.* Edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. London: Athlone Press.

Anadol, Refik (2021). https://refikanadol.com/works/quantummemories/. Accessed 31 August 2021

Beeple (2021). beeple-crap.com. Accessed 29 August 2021.

Bleeker, Maaike, Nanna Verhoeff and Stefan Werning (2020). Sensing data: Encountering data sonifications, materializations, and interactives as knowledge objects. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 26(5-6). 1088-1107

Douglas, Mary (1966). *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo.* London: Routledge.

DuBois, W.E. Burghardt (1961 [1903]). *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches.* New York: Fawcett.

Flusser, Vilém (2011). *Into the Universe of Technical Images*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Foucault, Michel (2004). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979.* Edited by Michel Senellart. Translated by Graham Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Freud, Sigmund (1979 [1919]). A Child is Being Beaten. *On Psychopathology.* Translated by James Strachey. Edited by Angela Richards. (= *Pelican Freud Library 10*). Harmondsworth: Pelican. 159 ff.

Kandinsky, Wassily (1977). *On The Spiritual In Art.* Translated by MTH Sadler. New York: Dover.

Kant, Immanuel (2000). Second Book: Analytic of the Sublime. *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Edited by Paul Guyer. Translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 128-159

Levi, Primo (1988). *If This is a Man/The Truce*. Translated by Stuart J Wolfe. London: Little Brown.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1969). *The Raw and the Cooked* (*Introduction to a Science of Mythology* Volume 1). Translated by John and Doreen Weightman. New York: Harper and Row.

Marx, Karl (1973). *Grundrisse.* Translated by Martin Nicolaus. London: Penguin/New Left Books.

Marx, Karl (1976). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: NLB/Penguin.

Menkman, Rosa (2011) *Glitch Studies Manifesto*. Geert Lovink and Rachel Somers Miles (eds) *Video Vortex 2: Moving Images Beyond YouTube*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures. 336-347

NGV (2020) *NGV Triennial 2020*. Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria. https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/exhibition/triennial-2020/. Accessed 29 August 2021.

Parisi, Luciana (2019). The alien subject of AI. *Subjectivity* 12(1). 27-48.

Pasquinelli, Matteo (2019). On the Origins of Marx's General Intellect. *Radical Philosophy* 2.06. 43-56.

Roberts, John (2007). *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade*. London: Verso.

Shanken, Edward A (2016). Contemporary Art and New Media: Digital Divide or Hybrid Discourse? Christiane Paul (ed) *A Companion to Digital Art*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell. 463-481.

Smith, Terry (2009). *What Is Contemporary Art?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

van Doesburg, Theo (1968). *Grundbegriffe der Neuen Gestaltenden Kunst / Grondbeginselen der Nieuwe beeldende Kunst / Principles of Neo-Plastic Art (1918)*. Translated by Janet Seligman; Introduction by Hans M. Wingler; Postscript by H.L.C. Jaffé. London: Lund Humphries

Virno, Paolo (2007). General Intellect. *Historical Materialism* 15(3). 3-8.