

a look at the role of the artist in the age of digital technology

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Introduction

In this paper, I compare values underlying Social Darwinist folklore (survival of the fittest by competition and adaptation benefits society at large) with values developed by American Philosophers in response to Social Darwinism. Those values are as well inherent in the new media (cooperativeness and availability benefit and advance society). With this I attempt to historically ground contemporary artistic choices regarding modes of production and valuation. I came to the conclusion that new technology is often not appreciated for the “message of the medium”, but that the push to use new technology as art medium often is an expression of Social Darwinist “adaptation by technology” that in many cases leads to a reproduction of old value systems in new modes of production.

The course and lecture series this text was requested for is titled “art, media and not-sense”. In my reading, not-sense stands for thought, examination and assessment - of art and media's actual and potential relation. In their article “On the Poverty of Student Life” from 1966, unnamed members of the Situationist International suggested that “to be avant-garde means to move in step with reality.” (AFGS, 331) What is reality? To determine that requires participation. As we all participate in some form of reality by the fact of our existence, it is not easy to observe it, from right smack in the middle. Our initial and useful impulse in every situation is to understand our surroundings in the terms of which we are already aware, to participate in ways we are used to and can take for granted, to communicate effectively within, to be understood, to be a successful member of a community. We need to be able, and we mostly are, to read our environment to get the practical cues necessary to act and to interact. We rarely have opportunities to take

time to step back and look, to expand and to refashion our tools of understanding, our thoughts. It is a useful metaphor to see thoughts as extensions of ourselves like our physical devices. This is a school. What we can learn here is to assemble and reassemble means of understanding by observing what we take for granted and compare it to the reality to which we have access - learning about the history of ideas as well as traveling within other cultures helps. We need to have a sense of humor and patience with ourselves if our constructions fail or are very clumsy at first. Of course we should in depth study, but not just apply the thoughts found in the sets available in the library. Those are temporary implements, and if the authors are still alive they are off to design modifications already.

Part I. General thoughts about the role of the artist

Detachment and objectivity are unattainable ideals carried over from classical science into the social sciences and from there into folklore where they now mostly reside. All practical and theoretical pursuits are personal since the pursuers of these causes have shaped them. They have culled them from their experience in a world shared with others, and shared more closely by the day, by increase in numbers and by expansion of transportation and communication technologies. Most private or public pursuits in this world clearly rely on people's mutual aid for their advancement and completion. The internet has become a tool to facilitate cooperation faster and faster since it has a multitude of connections that increase the possible interactions between the participants in the network - one can just write to strangers, no letters of introduction are needed in this global community since no hierarchy can be maintained in a community in which all are potentially authors. In pre-literal times spoken language was everyone's technology. After a long time of selective access to the printing presses, authorship - the ability to generate documents - is nearly universal now. As we are equally authors, our authority is leveled, and we are judged not on who we are, but on what we say. At the same time computers

are shared by researchers in parallel set-ups to accomplish larger and larger tasks by using each other's downtime efficiently. While the ability to cooperate is by no means a new human asset, cooperation across boundaries, not just collaboration in fixed groups, seems to be a key notion of our time, expressed in our technological advances. Tools of thought and tools of technology have a close relation indeed - they shape each other.

Meanwhile the role of the artist in popular and often also in professional imagination is still mired in concepts of the Romantic era. That is also the time of the industrial revolution with its burgeoning capitalism that involved rampant social exploitation and constituted the beginnings of the pollution of the natural environment on a grand scale. In this world, the artist was called "genius". What follows is a quick sketch of the history of the role of the artist: Before the industrial revolution, in the Middle Ages, an artist was a craftsman. During the Renaissance artists became intellectuals, writing books on perspective, designing flying machines and examining the human body. "Genius" as used in the Romantic Era is a term that can be related to a much older idea by Plato who fashions the artist as a divinely inspired nitwit, illustrated in the image of magnets suspended from each other, God on top, artist below, followed by the audience (Ion, 533d - 534e). That view reverses the achievements of the intelligent and self-determined Renaissance artist. The genius-artist is endowed with talent by birth and inspired by God. He needs little or no knowledge, but works on intuition paired with craftsmanship. The cost to pay for romantic genius was the danger and often reality of mental illness, straining for inspiration with or without the help of opiates. As the genius, in Immanuel Kant's definition "produces apart from rules," (95) he was special, one of a kind, not part of the social or any other framework. Thus he was placed firmly at the outskirts of society. Art had no relation to other pursuits. It was deemed a rarefied realm all its own. It could still be judged by people of good taste, though, keeping the artist on a leash after all. From then on the artist tended to stay on the fringes of society: in Europe, the Impressionists and Cubists could be called individualists. Their work focused on changing and personal perceptions as well.

Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists were seen as Bohemians, doing battle with the Bourgeoisie. Constructivists in Russia were an exception. But soon their intentions of working for the people were thwarted by their government, who allowed only the propaganda of socialist realism in the public realm. When the focus of the Western art world moved to the United States after World War Two, the artists who created Abstract Expressionist, Assemblage and Minimal Art were mostly able to eloquently discuss their work that was created amidst post war prosperity. It had not a wide public, but eventually found powerful financial support. Pop Art soon arose from familiarity with the manipulation media of advertising serving the growing consumer culture. In two examples from opposing ends of the spectrum of interest in social involvement by artists, Robert Rauschenberg later actively supported educational initiatives, while Donald Kuspit writes that: "Warhol could not care less for his audience." (Enchanting, 85) During and since this time, many artists have made consistent moves to redefine their role, many apparently with the desire to again be an integral and meaningful part of their environment, be it the local community or the newly found global village: political activists, designers, researchers of culture, instigators of creativity all work simultaneously.

The sculptor David Smith complains in an essay from 1953: "The artist has been told by almost everybody what art is, what the artist's function is, most often by people who do not perceive, love or make art, but who nonetheless presume the right, because they are laymen, historians or critics or figure somewhere in the art fringe, to make definition. According to certain self-appointed oracles, the artist should be the illustrator of church fable, the servant of religion. To others, the so-called socially conscious group, the artist should serve Marxist realism. ... Finally there are those who make no bones about their hostility to art by telling us that the real art of our time is architecture and the machine." (664)

How can artists determine their role? I cite two examples of efforts made by graduate students to create a role for themselves. One student debated the role of the artist in the

context of the field of visual communication, the other as a painter: I was a participant in a faculty critique panel. I had not met either of the students before.

1. The first student, a visual communications major, presented two bodies of work, one of which was comprised of solutions for assignments, one of personal work. While she clearly solved the problems posed in the assignments, she found that she had more to say. She was able to isolate problems she found within her realm of experience. She determined themes that made it necessary to create her own work. She had very stringently, yet modestly, considered how she could share her insights and made an effort to strike a balance between her private situation, which happens to be her life within two distinctly different cultures, and a meaningful public statement. To her solutions, using images and text, she brought what appeared to be intuitive uses of color and composition. She arrived at work of a high level of intelligence and poetry that challenged the viewer to engage with her clear and complex statement. This student had not set out to be an artist. She became an artist from the necessity to communicate, and made an effort to share important insights. Those insights had been won from the need to compare two cultures with diverging rules, seen from the inside and from the outside. The perception of sets of rules, each taken for granted in their own realm and the personal need to place herself in both of their contexts inspired this work.

2. The second student, the painter, refused to discuss his intent in creating his images beyond the vague expression of a hope that his work be appreciated. He was unwilling or unable to explain his refusal to verbally communicate as well and presented the character of a non-analytical (not anti-intellectual but a-intellectual), but still diligently working proper young 'artist'. His work appeared to be intentionally devoid of meaning. He attempted to find a lowest common denominator of what people might like, and what he claimed to indeed like. I saw myself faced with a performance. I was confronted with a young colleague who denied collegueship by presenting an act instead of discussing an approach. He refused to share in a common world, reticently setting up a territory all his

own instead. We are expected to share in his territory by trying to find merit with his work. As long as we join his party and project ourselves into his parameters, he succeeds in playing the artist. By purporting not to have a subject or a theme he actually looks for subjects to control. Through those means - the act that does not allow for an exchange in conjunction with the work - he attempts, consciously or not, to trick viewers into acts of submission towards him; the genius without a clue would like to meet the viewer without an interest in art. Commodity meets consumer. The refusal to share or contribute to a common reality has a direct consequence: any sincere viewer's humanity is denied. I understand humanity as the cooperative creation of a common reality. Instead, manipulation is the mode of this work. Instead of contributing to our knowledge, he subtracts himself.

Part II. From Social Darwinism to Pragmatism

For a while now I have been tossing around the following notion: I never enjoyed competition too much, in either of its incarnations. A contest can be an incentive to improve what we do within the framework of an existing game with fixed rules - we can go all out, since we do not need to watch our backs. We can even challenge the rules after and before the game. It is possible to define human societies as games of that kind, but the perception of life as a contest implies that the rules of our ethical, social and legal framework are not challenged from within, but broken as inconveniences where it seems fit - there is no outside to life, it goes on and then it ends. I have been thinking about competition on this scale as an outdated evolutionary model of life - which indeed it has been shown to be. Because of the increasing density of our population and the power of technology we ought to replace it with a model of cooperation, given that the survival of the species no longer relies on aggression and sexual reproduction alone, but also on the preservation and intelligent administration of our life-world. Buckminster Fuller made many suggestions regarding the administration of resources - especially in his 'world-

game' - convincing me that there is enough to go around. A statement by artist Patrick Clancy in an essay from 1972, titled "Arts of the Environment" and published as a group statement for the collaborative art group PULSA induced me to more sincerely consider the foregoing. Clancy wrote that "Survival of the fittest is a simplistic abstraction; it purports to explain the existence of isolated competitive individuals, but is actually a tautology that obscures the complex nature of interrelated parts of existence." (213) Reading Clancy's statement I realized that the phrase 'survival of the fittest' with its attendant conception of individualism resides at the center of American folklore. It appears to be a notion well worth examining. "Survival of the Fittest" is a tautology, a redundancy that confirms only itself: Who is fit survives, who survives is fit. It does not explain what makes one fit, but what is implied is that competition between individuals is the natural condition of life. How can this notion of competition be so deeply engrained in the public imagination while our contemporary tools of communication so clearly express our need and desire for the opposite? Competitive prejudice actively undermines the meaningful use of these tools designed to facilitate cooperation, with the apparent goal to adapt them to competitive causes. While earlier communication technologies, especially radio technology, were rerouted to become 1-way-streets, it appears that current technologies are safe by sheer expansion. To use them according to their potential, we must free our desires from contrary habitual assumptions -for instance: all competition is good- by examining the context and origins of those prejudices.

"Survival of the Fittest" is a phrase not coined by the British Naturalist Charles Darwin, who immediately comes to mind, but by the British Civil Engineer turned Sociologist Herbert Spencer who was writing about ideas of evolution and progress 9 years before Charles Darwin published "The Origin of Species" in 1859. Still, Spencer was influenced by Darwin's theories. The general application of ideas such as "adaptation" and "survival of the fittest" to social thought is known as "Social Darwinism". It would be possible to argue that human evolution showed the benefits of cooperation and community, as

Darwin himself did in his later book "The Descent of Man". Spencer, and American social Darwinists after him, did not take this view. Instead, they advocated "skill, intelligence, self-control and the power to adapt through technological innovation" (Hofstadter, 39) to answer to the unmediated pressures of subsistence. The tenets that Social Darwinism brought forth became deeply embedded in American thought, and run as a forceful folkloric current even as later developments in sociology and philosophy have long proven its intellectual defeat. Social Darwinist myth and the values based on it continue to shape habitual approaches to life and with that to the perception and the creation of art. An example of that could be seen in the above description of the a - intellectual student. The refusal to cooperate paired with an insistence on hard work immediately sets up a competitive mode. It confirms the status quo. It is not dynamic.

The American philosopher John Dewey in his essay "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy" likens the importance of Darwin's findings in the field of Biology to that of the Copernican Revolution in Astronomy when its consequences are applied to philosophy instead of political economy: In consequence of Darwin's realizations, philosophy may give up the inquiry after absolute origins and absolute finalities. It may instead explore specific values and the specific conditions that generate them. Dewey claims that "Finally, the new logic introduces responsibility into intellectual life. ... if insight into specific conditions of value and into specific consequences of ideas is possible, philosophy must in time become a method of locating and interpreting the more serious of the conflicts that occur in life, and a method of projecting ways for dealing with them: a method of moral and political diagnosis and prognosis." (149) A responsible approach fulfilling the above hopes was exemplified by the first student, approaching the role of the artist as that of a careful visualizer of perceptions based on personal, specific experiences. This artist intentionally cooperated in the creation of a shared reality.

The effects of Darwin's work on social thinking in America were fundamental, as is clearly described by Richard Hofstadter in his book "Social Darwinism in American

Thought". To understand them is essential in re-assessing the artist's role. Quoting from Hofstadter, I will briefly outline the following subjects:

1. Charles Darwin's "On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life" is a biological theory that explains how the adaptation to natural environments slowly shapes life forms.
2. Social Darwinism as introduced by Herbert Spencer applies biological theory to human social organization and introduces the phrase "survival of the fittest" in application to free market competition and later also to concepts of racial superiority. It implies that competition between individuals or races is the natural condition of life and over time leads to improved conditions for all.
3. The sociologist Lester Ward re-divides biological thought from social thought to show that one is aimless and wasteful, while the other can be ordered and goal oriented. To achieve ordered progress, feelings are perceived and refined by the intellect. Education advances society. Competition actually prevents the most fit from surviving.
4. John Dewey in the Pragmatist approach expands this to the thesis that while in biologically oriented thought the environment shapes the organism, socially oriented thought based on Darwinism's philosophical implications shows that the individual shapes the environment by the application of intelligence. Learning by experience is the favored method to advance intelligence. The ability to shape the environment brings with it mutual responsibility - the ethical need to cooperate.

"An age of rapid economic change, the age during which Darwin's and Spencer's ideas were popularized in the United States" - right after the Civil War - "was also one in which the prevailing mood was conservative." Darwinism was embraced as a welcome addition to the ideas to which conservative men "appealed when they wished to reconcile their fellows to some of the hardships of life and to prevail upon them not to support hasty ... reforms." (5) Darwinism was used to support the conservative outlook. "The most popular catchwords of Darwinism, "struggle for existence" and "survival of the fittest", ...

suggested that nature would provide that the best competitors ... would win, and that this process would lead to continuing improvement. This idea gave "the force of a natural law to the idea of competitive struggle." (6) Conservatism also "tried to dispense with sentimental or emotional ties." (7) The American sociologist William Sumner wrote: "In our modern state, and in the United States more than anywhere else, the social structure is based on contract. In a state based on contract sentiment is out of place in any public or common affairs. It is relegated to the sphere of private and personal relations." (qtd. in Hofstadter, 8) "Sumner [and his followers] were much concerned to face up to the hardness of life, ... to the necessity of labor and self-denial and the inevitability of suffering." This led to "an economic ethic that seemed to be demanded ... by a growing industrial society which was calling up all the labor and capital it could muster to put to work on its vast ... resources. Hard work and hard saving were called for. Leisure and waste were suspect."(10)

"Today we have passed out of the economic framework in which that ethic was formed. We expect leisure; we demand that we be spared economic suffering; we ... [have created the business of] ... advertising, whose function it is to encourage people to spend rather than save; ... we take up an economic theory like that of John Maynard Keynes which stresses the economic importance of spending ."(11)

"The virtues that Spencer and Sumner preached - personal providence, family loyalty and family responsibility, hard work, careful management, and proud self-sufficiency - were middle class virtues. ... while these writers preached slow change and urged men to adapt to the environment, the very millionaires whom they took to be the "fittest" in the struggle for existence were transforming the environment", not just competing within it. They rendered "the values of the Spencers and Sumners of this world constantly less fit for survival." (12)

Lester Frank Ward was a critic of Social Darwinist thought. He claimed that "there is no necessary harmony between natural law and human advantage,"(qtd. in Hofstadter, 73)

but that it was time to "settle down to a serious study of what was going on. The natural law and laissez-faire dogmas [which were government non-intervention in trade and business] had been useful intellectual devices in the days when society was being freed from monarchical and oligarchical rule. It was natural enough to oppose governmental interference when government was in the hands of autocrats, but it is folly to cling to this opposition in an age of representative government when the popular will can be exerted through legislative action. ... The laws of trade result in enormous inequalities in the distribution of wealth, which are founded in accidents of birth or strokes of low cunning rather than superior intelligence and industry." (72) "The classical economical theory says that competition keeps prices down ..., [but] competition breeds huge corporate organizations with dangerously broad powers." (73) Ward felt that the only constructive alternative is government regulation in the interest of society at large. He sharply distinguished between the biological evolution explored by Darwin and social evolution shaped by purpose, the subject Spencer and Sumner had developed. In the realm of social evolution Ward clearly states that: "Competition actually prevents the most fit from surviving." (74) Ward "agreed that man has been brought to his present stage of development by natural selection", which is Darwin's term. Intellect is the "supreme product" (75) of natural selection. We need to apply our intellect, our strongest tool, to our own improvement. Ward also "stressed the importance of feeling in social dynamics. Feelings, he insisted, are the basic component of mind; the intellect has been evolved as a guide to feelings. The social mind, a generalization or composite of individual minds, is made up of the social intellect and social feelings. ... intellect can guide the feelings into constructive channels by setting down laws and ideals. ... Intellect ... eventually becomes capable of formulating ideals for social and individual guidance." Ward called actions which bring progress "dynamic actions" . They can be performed only by creating a state of "dynamic opinion" . "If a whole society is to embark on a dynamic action, its people must be prepared and equipped through the broadest possible diffusion of knowledge." (76)

Ward demands that the "origination and distribution of knowledge are to be systematized and erected into true arts." (qtd. in Hofstadter, 76)

Herbert "Spencer had been content to assume the environment as a fixed norm." The philosophy of Pragmatism, developed by the American philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey, held "a more positive view " (123) of the activities of the individual. They saw the environment as something that could be changed and improved. "The pragmatists turned philosophy ... into an experimental study of the uses of knowledge. ... It emphasized the study of ideas as instruments"(124) of the individual. "As Spencer had stood for determinism and the control of man by the environment, the pragmatists stood for freedom and control of the environment by man."(125) Intelligence was understood as an effective "instrument in modifying the world"(135) ; this placed potential "social import and an urgent sense of social responsibility" (136) on the philosopher. As part of his theory of education Dewey demands that "direct participation in events is necessary to genuine understanding."(138)

"There was nothing in Darwinism that inevitably made it an apology for competition or force. intrinsically it was a neutral instrument, capable of supporting opposite ideologies. How, then, can one account for the ascendancy of the competitive individualist's interpretation of Darwinism? The answer is that American society saw its own image in the tooth-and-claw version of biological natural selection, and that its dominant groups were therefore able to dramatize this vision of competition as a good thing. Ruthless business rivalry and unprincipled politics seemed to be justified by the survival philosophy. As long as the dream of personal conquest and individual assertion motivated the middle class, this philosophy seemed tenable, and its critics remained a minority."(201)

The contemporary German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, associated with several European art schools, defines cynicism as "enlightened false consciousness. The term describes a position in which the individual understands the reality of the society in which

he or she lives and finds this reality so powerful as to be unchangeable. Thus the individual has to resign him or herself to work within this society's parameters without an attempt to change a thing."(Martz) I would like to call it dimly enlightened false consciousness. The cynical approach to being an artist clearly appears to be beholden to Social Darwinist thought. As under this theory the environment determines life, artists need to adapt and compete within this unchanging presence. Emotions or ideals are mere hindrances in the struggle and should be relegated to private life, leaving cold and empty works of art in the public realm, which is the realm of business.

Before Darwin, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in "The Transcendentalist" : "As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists.... The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of thought and will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture. These two modes of thinking are both natural, but the idealist contends that his way of thinking is in higher nature." (84)

Conclusion

The Pragmatic approach sees thoughts as the tools of ethically responsible individuals who cooperate in the creation of reality. Artists who see themselves as intellectuals can answer and have answered the "materialist" point of view. Art can and has been placed in the service of education, opening realms for contemplation, observation and play, for experiences that are real. Artists can educate themselves in the history of ideas and the history of events and share what they learn. Artists can define a new role for themselves that allows them to be shaping members of a society. They can adopt Ralph Waldo Emerson's definition of Genius, snatched from Immanuel Kant: "Intellect constructive", (Intellect, v) as Emerson terms it, is the only tenable concept that does not remove artists and other cultural practitioners from but integrates them into community. Artists can cooperate and cooperation accelerates learning. Contemporary technology is a great aid

in these processes. It places exchange and information in easy reach. I am convinced that Marshall McLuhan was right to claim that "the medium is the message." Our technologies do shape our lives by the way they function more than by the content they are made to carry. One message that a medium expresses is what we desire. Contemporary communication technology speaks clearly of our desire and readiness to cooperate.

In 1841 Emerson, humanist and transcendentalist, wrote on 'Self-Reliance': "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across the mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages....We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions."(87) This is echoed by the sculptor David Smith in his text titled 'Economic support of artists in America today'. 100 years after Emerson, Smith calls the artist's creative substance his identity. "How he comes about this is personal. Identity is internal, secret and slow-growing. The artist develops identity by self-confidence." (664) Charles Sanders Peirce, the Pragmatist, reached even further: In an essay called "Evolutionary Love" from 1893 he said: "The study of doctrines, themselves true, will often temporarily encourage generalizations extremely false. What I say, then, is that the great attention paid to economical questions during our century has induced an exaggeration of the beneficial effects of greed and of the unfortunate results of sentiment, until there has resulted a philosophy which comes unwittingly to this, that greed is the great agent in the elevation of the human race and in the evolution of the universe. (But) Philosophy, when just escaping from its golden pupa-skin, mythology, proclaimed the great evolutionary agency of the universe to be Love. Or, since this pirate-lingo, English, is poor in such-like works, let us say Eros." (208) Peirce goes on to a theological discussion.

I am inclined to see Pierce's Eros as the active force of delight in life, not found in the labors of consumption, but in the freedom of leisure and the enjoyment of learning, which together comprise the foundation of creativity. Creativity, perceived failure included, is the basis of self-confidence. Self-confidence is the prerequisite for identity, which is a

necessary condition for a keen awareness of reality. In creating reality we refine sentiments into thoughts and then into other tools to shape it with, which leads to the next turn of the spiral. This cycle proceeds through an exchange of practical and theoretical resources. Our understanding of this cycle and the actuality of cooperation are expressed in the new media, which are well suited for the task. While it is extremely important for artists who are in step with their time to understand these and related ideas, I do not believe that work relevant to those ideas necessarily has to be produced using new technology - that assumption is just another remnant of the Social Darwinist mythology demanding "skill, intelligence, self-control and the power to adapt through technological innovation." (Hofstadter, 39) Artwork can be produced in any medium, old or new. What is needed, in Donald Kuspit's words, is the use of the "creative power of sincere attunement [with the audience and] its power to make the other creative." (Fame, 74)

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