

MA Collaborative Dialogues (Photography)

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Confirmative Praxis (M7X02024)

Praxis Report:

<https://soundcloud.com/user-316094349/no-one-talks-about-the-weather-anymore-praxis-report>

Appendix: Report Transcript



no-one talks about the weather anymore

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Introduction: Progress-as-Regress

(or the Anthropocene as an inevitable consequence of the Enlightenment)

"the program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy. From now on, matter would at last be mastered without any illusion of ruling or inherent powers, of hidden qualities." (1979:3-6)

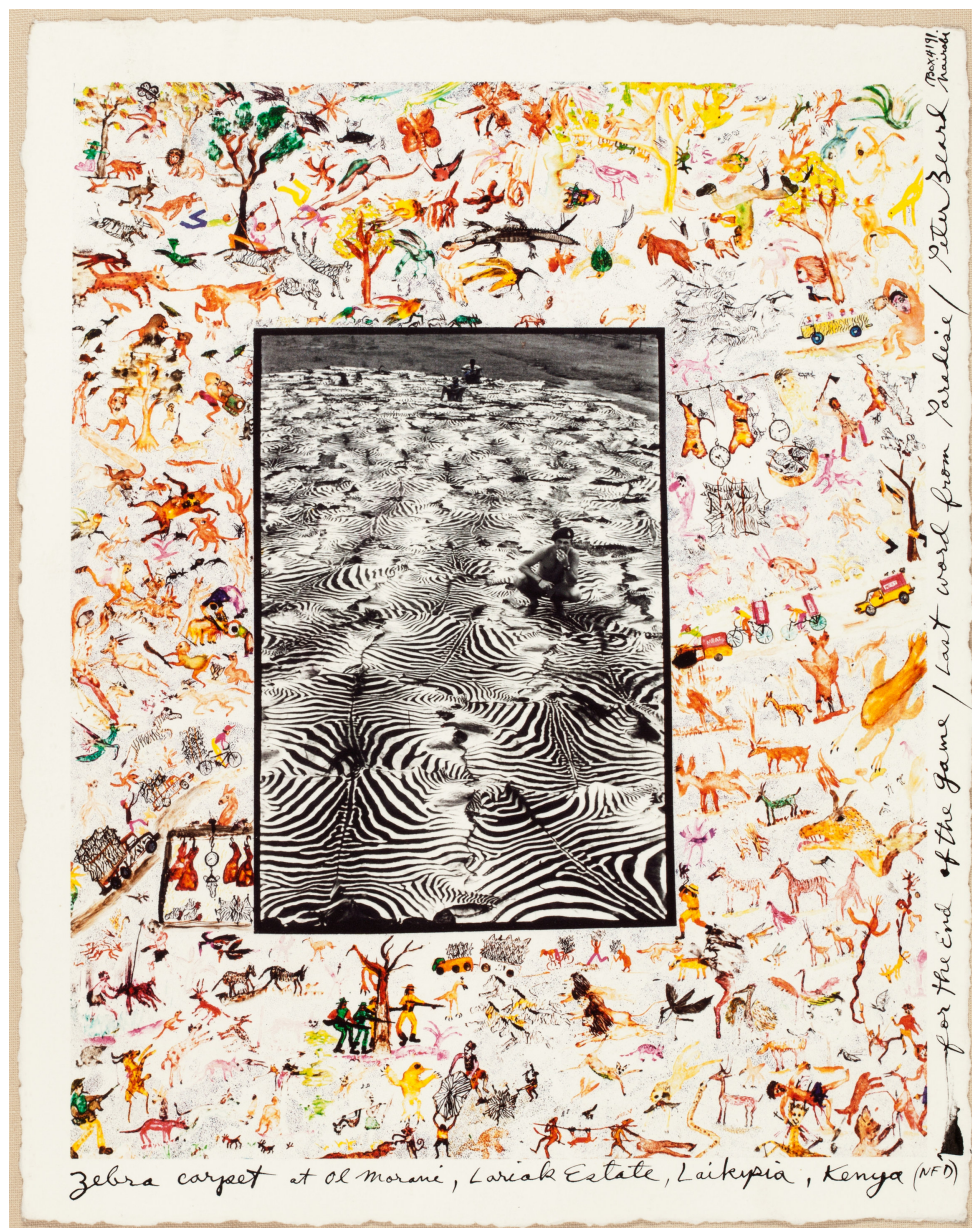
- Adorno & Horkheimer, The Dialectic of Enlightenment

The Age of Enlightenment ushered in a fundamental change in the relationship between human and world, bringing with it an unprecedented anthropocentric focus. Arguably, it was this essentially reductive filtering of the world that Adorno and Horkheimer described as "the disenchantment of the world". Prior to this, understanding of the world could be broadly split into the scientific and the spiritual. Despite persecution as a heretic for his heliocentric model of the universe, Galileo still acknowledged the existence of the spiritual - the distinction drawn was that the scientific was the world that could be described by man, and the spiritual was the world that could not be described (though this did not mean it was less important - indeed, as ignorance is a necessary precondition of learning, so seeking a way to explain the unexplainable could be said to be a fundamental motive, both of natural philosophy and modern science). By

placing all of society's eggs into the increasingly blinkered scientific basket of Enlightenment thinking, a significant part of the human condition and ideological exploration was diminished.

"myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power." (1979:9)

- Adorno & Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*



Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com

Figure 1: Zebra Carpet, Peter Beard, 1963

A post-structuralist critique of the Enlightenment locates a significant part of the anthropocentric fallacy within the conflation between the logocentric and the phonocentric; which Derrida noted was a symptom of Western logocentrism (Derrida, 1978). If reason holds primacy over all, and the spoken word holds a higher value than written language, it follows that the voice of man is the voice of reason – a neatly recursive argument to prove humanity's self-importance.



Figure 2: Anthropocene, Edward Burtynsky, 2018

The consequence of this paradigm has been well documented within the ecological movement since the early 60s, yet

remains compartmentalised from the mainstream. Photographers ranging from Peter Beard to Edward Burtynkysy have presented images that should shock and repulse humanity, yet seem to make no difference at all, perhaps supporting the perspective of contemporary writers such as Timothy Morton that all individual actions are statistically and morally insignificant (Morton, 2018).

Despite, or perhaps because of, this sense of alienation and statistical insignificance, the intention behind this project was to attempt to create a document that would reflect the reality of an individual, subjective experience through the combined media of photography and text. The original parameters drawn up were to create: a psychogeographic journal of Swansea; an empirical charting of an urban existence on a hill by the sea over the course of a calendrical year; a chronophotographic typology of the sky (photographs were taken daily from the same place - approximately 51°37'33N by 3°56'47W, facing roughly North by West on a thirty two wind compass at an estimated angle of 60° elevation and predominantly between the hours of 09:00 and 10:00); and finally an experiential record of localised manifestations of weather.

Chapter 1: Metrics of Control

"The weather may well be the last bastion of myth today, in so far as it is seen to be beyond our control, of concern to us all, and seemingly apolitical – hence a safe subject for dinner conversation. This view of the weather is clearly mythic, in that it serves to remind us of our impotence as individuals, and opens the way to a greater tolerance for state control and intervention, particularly when the state is allied with knowledge and know-how..."

- Ackbar Abbas, *Adorno and the Weather, Critical Theory in an Era of Climate Change*, 2012

In an anthropocentric world, a dominant characteristic is the exercise of control, or at least the semblance of it, by which we make our mark. Standardisation and mathematical abstraction stand out as the ideal tools for this. What starts out sounding like a reasonable idea – take Pythagoras' standardisation of tuning in music as an example, ends up very much as one of Adorno and Horkheimer's tools of worldly disenchantment. The application of mathematics brings about a literal harmony to a previously chaotically disordered environment, however that process of codification excludes (as any common denominator model is bound to) scales and rhythms that fall outside of it.

"The ratios and proportions that initially helped us grasp songs turned into the rules and constraints that defined them. The strategies and schemas were often seen as the 'authentic' music, and the actual sounds only got validation through their allegiance to what was written on the printed page... The eventual result was a conceptualization of music that excluded far more than it allowed."

- Music, A Subversive History, Ted Gioia

This allegiance to the written word with its concomitant authenticity is an illustration both of anthropocentric logocentrism and a hallmark of those most insidious mainstream metrics of control that locate one into an externally predetermined and conventionally unassailable position in the world: the map, the clock and the calendar.

“Rosencrantz: I don't believe in it anyway.
Guildenstern: What?
Rosencrantz: England.
Guildenstern: Just a conspiracy of cartographers, then?”

– Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Tom Stoppard

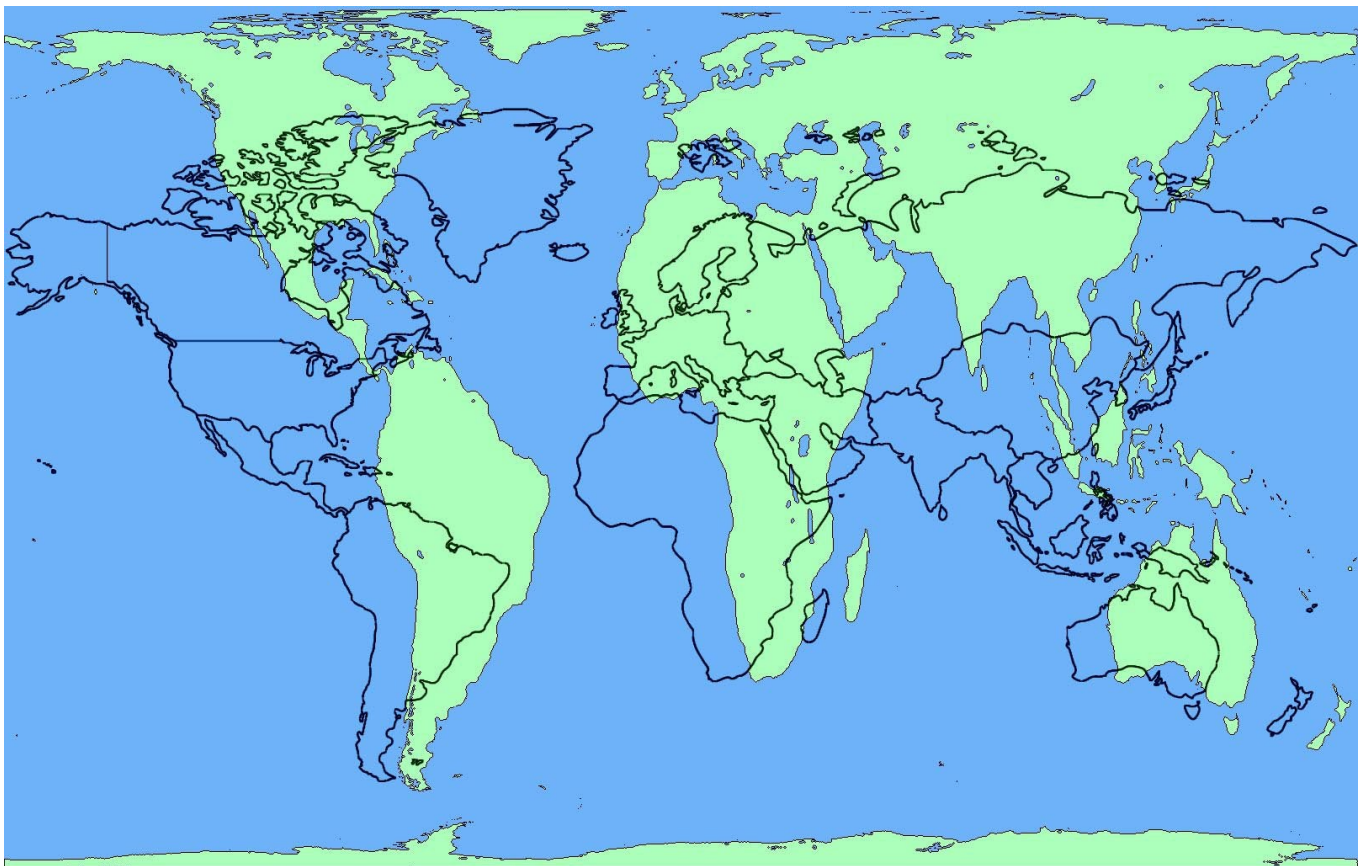


Figure 3: Mercator vs Gall Peters projection world map (a conspiracy of cartographers)

The notion of synchronic time discipline only really came into being with the age of industrialisation (Thompson, E.P, 1967). The function of mechanical clock time was to allow factory owners a means both of separating salary from actual output (a process that continues to exponentially polarise wealth to this day) and of controlling the efficiency of the human units within their factories.

The adoption of the Gregorian calendar in 1752 sparked unrest (The Calendar Riots) in the UK, although primarily in Bristol and more rural areas, not because people genuinely lost 11 days (as referenced by Hogarth with the slogan "Give us our eleven days!") but because the traditional rhythms and rituals of the countryside were displaced by an authoritarian diktat from the city (Poole, R, 1998) - an act of centralisation of power that placed the economic considerations of industry above the considerations of the common man.

Symbolist and 'Pataphysician extraordinaire, Alfred Jarry, created his own revised version of the calendar with a 13 month cycle. Each month was made up of 29 days, where the 29th day of the month (the hunyadi) is imaginary and

therefore not included within the weeks (with the exception of two). The nomenclature of the calendar is derived both from Jarry's works and his own idiosyncratic canon of saints (Pataphysical Calendar, 2021). The calendar (and arguably, therefore the authentic world by virtue of the authority of the written word) begins on the day of his birth. It stands as a supreme act of mythopoesis, yet this only has an impact as a result of society's reification of previous historical constructs; all of which contain equivocal amounts of arbitrariness and ego as Jarry's. The Pataphysical Calendar could be said to place the focus of attention on the nature and purpose of the calendar - if it locates us as individuals within the wider world, it could be argued that we should each have our own version drawn up at birth; if it is simply a tool of synchronic time then it is clearly arbitrary, and therefore of questionable authenticity. The only reasonable conclusion to draw is that is a political construct of dominion, designed for no greater purpose than to keep the powerless in their place. Forcing traditional, and more recently invented, celebrations into the calendrical framework serves to incentivise the masses into an unquestioning obedience to it. Where Marx said that religion was the opium of the masses, in today's secular society

perhaps it is the bank holiday weekend that has become the opium of the masses.

Any discussion of perspective and arbitrary lines would be impoverished without the words of Hito Steyerl. In her essay, *In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective*, she clearly illustrates the use of the horizon as an example of an arbitrary line and its connection to how the world is viewed.

Starting from the position of early human navigation and the commonality of the horizon as a shared perspective for sailors, she goes on to point out that that commonality was rapidly appropriated and perverted by technology:

"Linear perspective is based on several decisive negations. First, the curvature of the earth is typically disregarded. The horizon is conceived as an abstract flat line upon which the points on any horizontal plane converge (...) the construction of linear perspective declares the view of a one-eyed and immobile spectator as a norm - and this view is itself assumed to be natural, scientific, and objective. Thus, linear perspective is based on an abstraction, and does not correspond to any subjective perception. Instead, it computes a mathematical, flattened, infinite, continuous, and homogenous space, and declares it to be reality."

- Hito Steyerl, *In Free Fall: A thought experiment on vertical perspective*

This declaration of reality aligns with certain conceptions of the photograph as document. Whether the absolute indexicality of Charles Peirce or the tautological duality of Roland Barthes, the creation of a photograph carries with it an inherent statement of an abstracted reality.

"The type of consciousness the photograph involves is indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the being-there of the thing... but an awareness of its *having-been-there*. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction of the here-now and the there-then."

- Roland Barthes, *The Rhetoric of the Image*

When discussing his project *Soliloquy*, in which Kenneth Goldsmith recorded and transcribed every word he said for a week in April, 1996, he remarked that he had a much more detailed recall of everything that had happened in that week than he had ever achieved from taking a photograph (UbuWeb Film & Video: Kenneth Goldsmith - The Idea Lecture (for David Antin) (2017), 2021).

A decision was made therefore, to accompany each image with a journal entry - a few sentences to try to sum up something of the feel of each day. Richard Mabey in his book, *Turned Out Nice Again*, wrote with great passion in favour of a more

emotional approach to the weather. In it, he draws the distinction between a weather-scape and a weather-story. He cites one of his inspirations as Gilbert White, a journal keeper who wrote in 1768: "Black weather. Cucumber fruit swells. Rooks sit." (Mabey, 2019). This parallels nicely with Abbas' discussion of Adorno. When Adorno examined Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, the weather is an important feature of the text, but it is all described through scientific, or technological, language, such as "zero by the thermometer, fifty by the heliometer, a hundred by the anemometer, zero by the hydrometer" (Abbas, 2021). The linguistic contrast between the mythical and the scientific is stark.

Using the 32 wind compass rose as a base model, the northern meteorological seasons were broken down across the calendrical year, with the idea that by increasing the nominal accuracy of the metric it actually reduces the authority of the taxonomy - Spring as a single entity holds significant semiotic authority (a strong set of culturally predetermined associative values). By attempting to be more accurate, the subset of Spring, Spring by Summer, Spring Spring Summer, Spring Summer by Spring, Spring Summer, Spring

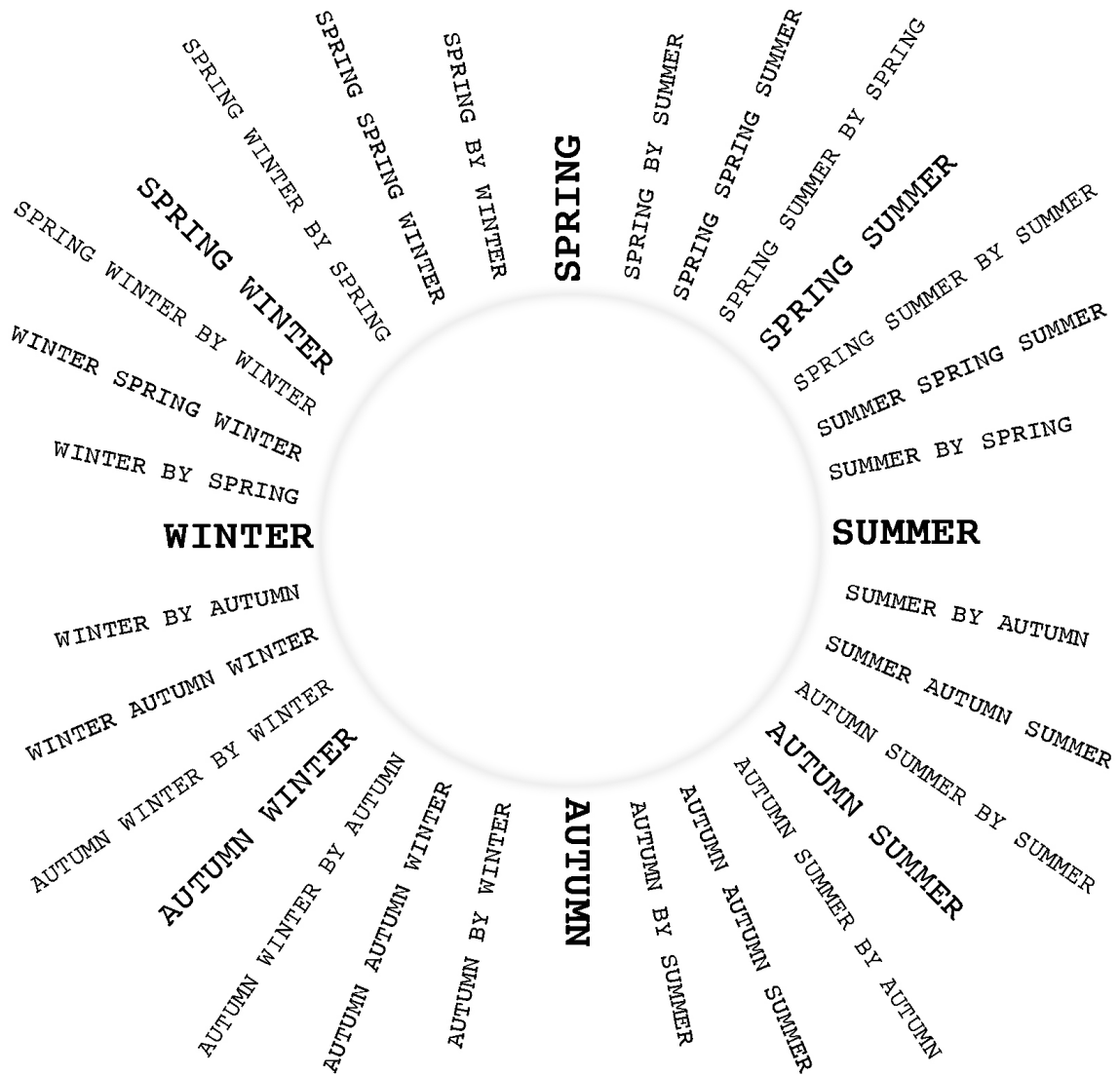


Figure 4: Speculative 32 Season Rose, Benesek Monk, 2020

Summer by Summer, Summer Spring Summer and Summer by Spring disrupts the semiotic authority of the original term, much as Derrida's linguistic undecidability displaces conventional binary dynamics. Prophetic notions of control are done away with in favour of a recognition and acceptance of the current.

As with the original wind rose, prior to the standardisation of the winds, there was no universal metric that located one definitively; rather it provided a matrix for correlationism - as long as one had an awareness of one's immediate situation, the rose could provide a model for contextualisation. So the seasonal rose created here provides a potential matrix for navigation through the destabilisation of the conventional climate and seasonal progression. If one allows for an emancipation from the linear idea of progression and accepts that seasons can move backwards as well as forwards through our mechanised construct of time, the Season Rose can potentially offer insight into what came before and what might come after.

Similarly, within the methodology of journal keeping, a deliberate attempt was made to provide subjective experiences of weather rather than scientific ones. The language of wind speeds, temperatures, barometric pressure and rainfall levels were avoided in favour of a more narrative approach.

Chapter 2: The Great Acceleration

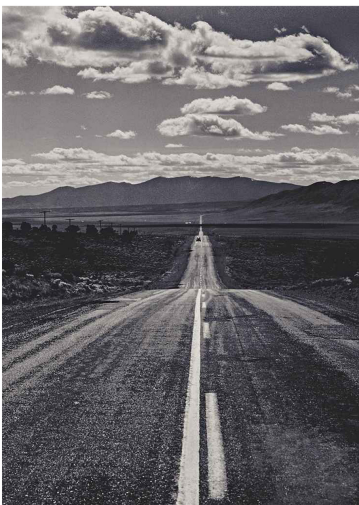
"the displacement of perspective creates a disembodied and remote-controlled gaze, outsourced to machines and other objects."

- Hito Steyerl - In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective

Much as the Great Acceleration marked the exponential surge in socioeconomic and earth system trends that defined the beginning of the Anthropocene, so it could also be argued to have marked the technological surge that distanced humanity from itself - the point at which the machine no longer existed to service humanity, but rather humanity began to exist to service the machine, or at least the machine began to service itself and humans were no longer central or even necessary. To take images as an example, with the proliferation of thumbnails and image searches, algorithms have become both the primary consumer and producer of images - leaving aside the vast quantities of non-human images produced directly by webcams, CCTV and satellites, any images uploaded by humans are immediately copied, both as faithful reproductions and in altered states, and disseminated across the cloud.

To come back to Hito Steyerl's *In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective*, she goes on to illustrate how technological acceleration destabilised perspective, both visually and in a wider sense of being. Figure 5 charts the changes in perspective through a photographic lens.

Linear perspective



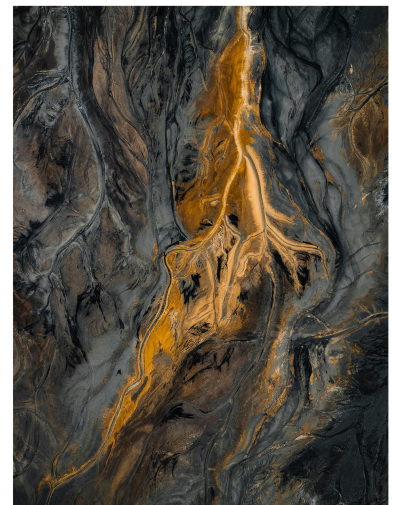
Ansel Adams, Coastal Road, 1953

Verticality of perspective



Sebastião Salgado, Brooks Range, 2009

Free Fall



Tom Hegen, Ash Pond, 2018

Figure 5: Three photographs charting the technological acceleration of perspective

In Ansel Adams' classic image, *Coastal Road*, one is very much located within that world. The lens serves as the proxy eye and places the viewer into the landscape, standing upon that road. The horizon is inescapable and clearly separates the immediacy of the viewer from the remote view, reinforcing a binary positioning of human and world mediated through a technological process.

Salgado's landscapes are radically different to those of Adams. Where Adams presents a cold document of what is outside of the self, Salgado approaches landscape as portraiture, presenting a warmth and intimacy wholly lacking in the former. The unstable horizon raises questions as to the location of the viewer - as an aerial photograph it necessitates a further level of technological distancing from the world and provides the viewer with a perspective that can be imagined but never truly experienced without the ability to fly. A bird's eye view as speculated upon by man.

Tom Hegen's photographs, taken from much higher altitudes, create a perspective so far removed from direct experience that they become truly abstracted. The viewer cannot necessarily tell if they are viewing things from far away or under magnification. The lines between human and world could be said to be so blurred because the lens is positioned where a human eye would never be without significant technological intervention. A god's eye view beyond the grasp of the ground dwelling primate.

The advent of computational photography with its ability to stack and stitch, construct and reconstruct images offers the illusion of greater creative control whilst simultaneously reducing the genuine input of the human operator.

In the analogue age, the photographer would relinquish control of the creative process in the act of capturing an image. It was a stochastic interplay of light and chemistry that excluded human access. The photographer could only choose when to begin and when to end the process.

In the digital age, the photographer relinquishes control in a much wider sense. The image capture begins with the relationship between subject and algorithm. The shutter release is a skeuomorph, providing a vestigial trace of a control that never was.

The semiotician, Charles Peirce said:

"A symbol is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant."

- Charles S Peirce, Philosophical Writings

The interpretant (what is required for the interpreter to make sense of the symbol) is located within a quasi-mind e.g. language, cultural conditioning, etc.

Arguably the quasi-mind can be non-human, hence human understanding of animal behaviours such as explanations of mating rituals.

It could be suggested then, that the hidden layer of a neural network functions as a non-human quasi-mind - even if all of the original inputs were human, the recursive iterations of the digital realm have multiplied the data beyond human conception/perception.

This quasi-mind is beyond human access, yet produces outputs that are accessible by humans. The words and images created can be, in the case of a deep-fake generative engine, indistinguishable from human creative works.

In order to examine this notion of illusory control and authorship, each of the journal entries was processed through two free-to-use cloud based neural networks. The first took the entirety of the text for that day's entry and generated an image in response. The second generated a text based around a sentence or fragment from that day's entry.

The notion that the photograph has an intrinsic value as a document has already been undermined, both through the composition (the lack of distinguishing features or landmarks mean that the images are essentially interchangeable and quintessentially unremarkable) and through the use of computational photography (the images created are of questionable authenticity due to the unmeasurable algorithmic authorial touch). Certain features produced in the images appear to correspond to the text, but as often do not, suggesting that the human tendency toward pattern recognition may play as much of a role as any authorial intent.

Similarly, certain texts generated appear uncannily familiar in tone and content. This suggests that humans are not as individually special as they'd perhaps like to believe and the cumulative data of the cloud can easily present creative simulacra.

The avoidance of what Alfred Jarry called "vulgar" dates (Pataphysical Calendar, 2021), essentially mainstream calendrical dates, together with the Seasonal Rose and the lack of differentiation between human and machine author all speak to the contemporary state - adrift in a world bereft of

security - the old myths are no longer fit for purpose, forecasts are unreliable and navigation has become an esoteric art (the prevalence of GPS having pushed map reading into a niche of special interest rather than a necessity of existence).

Chapter 3: The Planned Obsolescence of the Author

"Thus it was at the present time; that many individuals, who could not distinguish words from things, were making an outcry for that of which they could not well explain the nature."

- James Scarlett, 1820, *The trial of Henry Hunt ... with the addresses of the several defendants* (Manchester, 1820), p. 12.

There is an inescapable information asymmetry brought about through the transactional use of technologies. As in commerce where the consumer is unaware of the machinations of the manufacturer that render their products obsolete, so we as humans have unwittingly rendered ourselves obsolete by way of consumption. The demand for ever more advanced features has produced a situation where in many areas of human life, there is no longer any real need for a human operator.

Photographer Stephen Gill produced a remarkable book in 2019 called *The Pillar*. The result of a long-form project, he placed a fencepost on his land with a fixed motion capture camera attached and recorded the life of that post over four years. The images created contain an unexpected vitality - conceivably as the result of the absence of the human, thus providing an insight into the world as far removed from our natural perception as Tom Hegen's landscapes.



Figure 6: Images from *The Pillar* by Stephen Gill, 2019

An interesting point to note is that none of the image are created directly by a human, yet through the curatorial act the anthropocentric bias of the artist is revealed. The primacy of interest is located in the biological over the meteorological or geographical for example.

Norwegian artist, Peder Jørgenson, created the online artificial intelligence Inspirobot in 2015. Coded with the intention of “...generating unlimited amounts of unique inspirational quotes for endless enrichment of pointless human existence” (Jørgenson, 2021), it did garner some level of media attention and has since attracted a cult following, but its output is not quite what was initially intended.

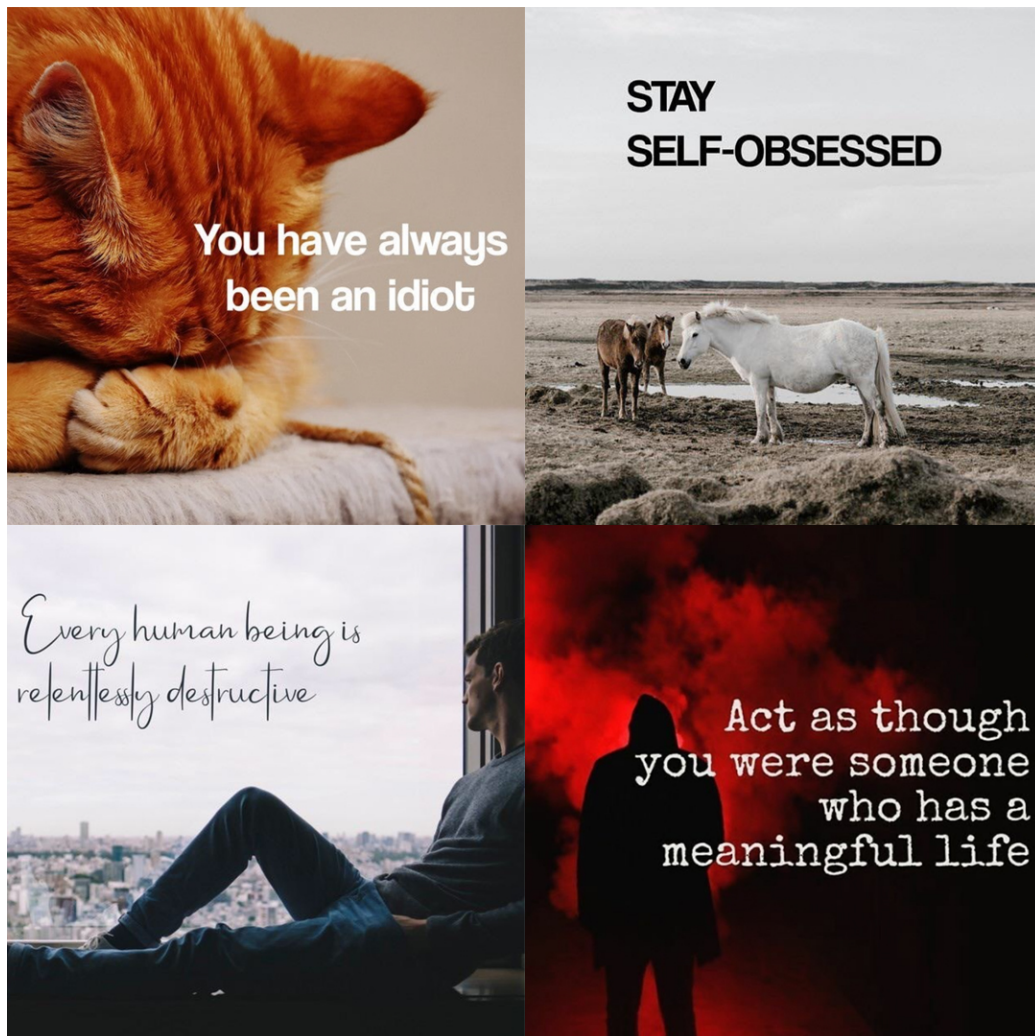


Figure 7 – Four examples of Inspirobot's inspirational quotes

Whilst still following a clear format compositionally, the machine writing that has developed is often labelled sinister.



Figure 8: Tay (bot) first tweet and after less than 17 hours of online interaction

When Microsoft launched their Tay chat bot on Twitter in 2016, it had to be taken down within hours due to a combination of the structure of the coding and the concerted efforts of Twitter users to subvert its learning process.

Tay's output rapidly devolved into holocaust denial, anti-semitism, overt racism, and 9/11 conspiracy theories. Whilst undeniably upsetting, this was very much the result of the interaction between the machine and the human users.

Where Inspirobot differs is that it doesn't directly interact with users. Instead its algorithms learn from the cloud in a recursive fashion more closely related to the advanced neural networks being created to generate deep-fake works today. Whilst some have accused it of being a fake due to its often unsettlingly apt and responsive outputs to current affairs, Jørgenson has left it to its own devices since the launch - it is simply reflecting, and responding to, the informational zeitgeist.

The focus of the Enlightenment on abstracted knowledge, and the value placed upon it could lead to the evolution of what artificial intelligence thinkers have termed the mind-child and the post-biological. Rather than considering humanity as being rendered obsolete, one could view technology as a part of humanity, and therefore it is simply the biological aspect of the human that will no longer hold any significant relevance.

An interesting contemporary work by Adam Broomberg, formerly of Broomberg and Chanarin, in collaboration with Isaac Schaal, is the setting up of an interactive artificial intelligence alter ego called adam.baby, using an OpenAI neural network and based on his own 30 year internet history. As well as the version that is accessible to all online, there are also a limited number of editions that will be available to collectors. Rather than being offered for sale, instead the collector pays a monthly amount in virtual child support. The adam.baby will respond and adapt to the way in which it is treated and much like the Tamagotchi digital pets of the mid nineties, can die if neglected.



Figure 9: Tamagotchi (1996) & adam.baby (2021)

Warren Motte in his paper, *Experimental Writing, Experimental Reading*, cites Gerald Prince thus:

"...experimental texts share three principal traits. First, they usually focus on form rather than on content. Second, the sites they explore are typically textual sites rather than those of the phenomenal world; in other words, they are primarily concerned with writing itself. Third (and perhaps most crucially), they are programmatic."

- Warren Motte, *Experimental Writing, Experimental Reading*

Whilst experimental writing is often considered almost as the exclusive preserve of the avant-garde, it is possible to consider the writing produced by a neural network in much the same way. A deep-fake engine produces texts that appear authentic, yet it is the form that takes precedence over content, much like fluency is a far more effective tool of communication than grammatical or syntactical accuracy in speech. As a non-human writer, the world inhabited by the algorithmic author is inherently noumenal - the phenomenal world is unattainable and therefore exploration of said world is impossible. Lastly, the connection between the algorithm and the programmatic is self-evident.

An early inspiration for this project was the writer Gertrude Stein, particularly in her literary portraits. There is a fittingly uncomfortable symmetry, both in terms of the technological outsourcing of creative experimentation with her interest in automatic writing, and in stylistic terms of repetition and fragmented syntax. Both writings border on the incomprehensible at times, yet also contain moments of vivid illumination - sometimes within multiple readings of the same passage of text.

Conclusion: An Irregular Ode to Fancy

The climate is no longer reliable (if it ever was)

A photograph is no longer reliable (if it ever was)

The author is no longer reliable (if they ever were)

No-one talks about the weather anymore blends the mythopoeic and technological artifice.

The book serves as a poetic guide to everything and nothing - it describes transient moments in the subjective past of an unremarkable individual together with the creative musings of a collective of algorithms at a transient point in their evolution, already long past (from a technological perspective).

It provides a disruption of the narrative of seasonal progression, already something remarked upon on an annual basis as the impact of climate change becomes more apparent on human activities (from multiple breeding cycles of pests within a season affecting farmers to the consistently record-breaking heat with its concomitant impacts on health and economy).

It illustrates the limitations of the photograph as an axiomatic document, both undermining the utility of the format and questioning the role of the photographer in the creative process.

Derrida posited that the adoption of fancy was a means to overcoming preconceptions (Spivak, G. and Derrida, J., 1998).

It can be read in its entirety as a simple document of the year 2020. Alternatively, one could dip into it as an advisory/divinatory aid akin in no meaningful way to the I Ching. A similarity could be there in the substitution of a localised matching of the sky for the cleromancy of the throwing of hexagrams. However, where the I Ching offers ancient Chinese philosophical texts, that arguably form the foundation of Taoist thought, No-one talks about the weather anymore offers unashamedly superficial texts, based on a wilful mixture of ipseity and the evolving quasi-mind of the cloud.

Still, both serve as an exercise in mindfulness - neither a

text written over two and a half thousand years ago, nor the one produced last year are written with the express intent of advising any particular individual - it is not the practice of analysing and locating oneself within the text, but rather within the world of the wider lived experience that is of paramount importance.

No-one talks about the weather anymore serves to highlight the anthropocentric fallacy of creativity. It allows me to lay claim to the role of poet as well as the role of photographer.

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