

**ARTISTS OF THE FLOATING WORLD: RETHINKING ART-SUSTAINABILITY
RELATIONS IN THE LATE DAYS OF MODERNITY**

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
(Resource Management and Environmental Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

June 2014

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Abstract

This research is an attempt to reroute art-sustainability relations through the metaphysical juncture of Modernism's fading dichotomies, i.e. fact-value, subject-object, culture-nature. For many this relationship has fallen short, particularly in the form of infocentric, instrumental engagements aimed at behaviour change. *But if we read sustainability as a problem of worldview and artistic agency as ontological in nature, might something more promising emerge?* To explore this, four artists were commissioned to produce work in response to an analysis of sustainability built around Bruno Latour's 'Modern Constitution'. The interests were twofold, to investigate the challenge of engaging art's 'ontological agency' in light of prior art-sustainability frustrations; and to explore practical and ontological dimensions of operating 'beyond' the dichotomies of Modernity.

The first interest concerns the prescriptive challenge of artistic agency—how do we 'use' art? Outcomes include the following explorations: A distinction between art's behavioral and ontological agencies; a proposed category of 'artistic ontologists' to house scholarship aligning ontological agency with aesthetic, expressive, and imaginative priorities; a view of art as 'double agent', necessarily 'of' and 'against' encompassing rationalities; and the argument that a healthy view of art is fundamentally epistemological, a means to learn not teach.

Regarding a 'post' Modern or 'post-normal' world, this research proposes to shift sustainability from the well-worn challenge to prove the world *real* to the more perplexing challenge to prove the world *imaginary*. This entails a shift from 'substantive' approaches to sustainability (facts drive values) to 'procedural' approaches, where sustainability emerges from the interactions of immanent human and non-human agencies. Practical concerns include structuring emergent dynamics within collective processes and shifting expertise accordingly. Ontological dimensions explore particular 'qualities of immanence' that might shape our imaginings in fruitful ways, while pursuing a genuine exit from Modernity nonetheless. Building on Mike Hulme's arguments, I suggest sustainability in an imaginary world involves 'flipping the sustainability predicate', turning a problem we are trying to solve into one that solves us. This engages John Robinson's work on 'regenerative sustainability' by arguing that regenerative approaches may not only be more compelling, but increasingly in line with emerging logics of a post-normal world.

Preface

Ethics Certificate Number H11-00120 was granted by the UBC Human Research Ethics board for this study. I developed the theoretical framework and methodology and conducted all the empirical data collection and wrote the manuscript. No elements of this research have been published previous to this presentation. I would like to acknowledge the title of the work is a loose borrowing from Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Artist of the Floating World*.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Preface	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Tables	ix
List of Figures	x
Acknowledgements	xi
Dedication	xii
Chapter 1: Art-Sustainability relations in the late days of modernity	1
1.1 The right instinct, the wrong invitation?.....	1
1.2 Hypothesis: a quest for better leverage	3
1.3 Theoretical reframing: from the informative to the imaginative.....	5
1.3.1 Information Deficit Models and the instrumentalization of art	7
1.3.1.1 An enduring faith in knowing better	7
1.3.1.2 Disenchanted the aesthetic	8
1.3.2 Art as ontological reflexivity	11
1.3.2.1 A phenomenological view of ontological reflexivity	12
1.3.2.2 Heidegger and the ontological agency of art.....	14
1.3.2.2.1 world/earth tensions	15
1.3.2.2.2 Tools vs. Art	16
1.3.3 Raulet's critique: a scrutiny of agency.....	19
1.3.4 Sustainability in an imaginary world?.....	21
1.3.5 Bruno Latour and the Modern Constitution.....	23
1.3.5.1 The dichotomies of Modernity and their relevance to sustainability	23
1.3.5.2 Map/territory: the collapse of the Modern Constitution.....	24
1.3.5.3 Sustainability as a metaphysical problem: the failings of the IPCC.....	27
1.3.5.4 Transcendence vs. Immanence	29
1.3.5.5 Adding the imaginary to the Modern; Adding the material to the post-modern	33
1.3.5.6 A worldview in our hands?	36
Chapter 2: Methodology: The Ontological Pursuit	40
2.1 Research context: The Greenest City Conversations.....	40
2.2 The Double Agent.....	43
2.3 From myth to method	46

2.4	Research design.....	50
2.4.1	Artist selection	51
2.4.2	Evaluation methods	56
Chapter 3: Listening with Language.....		61
3.1	An artist in the borderlands	61
3.2	The Double Agent: metaphors to unmap the world	63
3.3	Commissioning new work for the Greenest City Conversations	67
3.3.1	Thingification: escaping the purgatory of trash.....	68
3.3.2	<i>Thingamajig</i> : conversations with stick, boots, and chair.....	70
3.3.2.1	<i>stick</i>	70
3.3.2.2	<i>boots</i>	72
3.3.2.3	<i>rocking chair</i>	74
3.4	Conjecture on the making of a metaphor.....	78
3.5	Engaging <i>Thingamajig</i> 's audience	80
3.5.1	Written feedback: love as the unclasp of objectivity	81
3.5.2	Poetry as epistemology: aiming the causal arrow	82
3.5.3	A little dose of causality: 'Thingifying' at home.....	84
3.5.4	The paradox of McKay's 'listening with language'.....	84
3.6	Two resolutions to McKay's paradox	92
Chapter 4: <i>You Are Very Star</i>.....		95
4.1	From private to public: emergent interactivity in immersive, devised theatre.....	95
4.2	Collaborative creators: The evolution of a devising company	95
4.2.1	Where do plays come from?	96
4.2.2	Immanence, interactivity, and an early need for structure	97
4.2.3	Collaborative models and the professional artist.....	101
4.3	Imagining the audience: a historical perspective.....	102
4.3.1	Character and audience identification	104
4.3.2	Giving an audience tools to use	104
4.3.3	A Heideggerian distinction.....	105
4.3.4	Substantive emergence: writing <i>for</i> an audience vs. writing <i>with</i> an audience.....	106
4.4	Immersive theatre: when the wall came down... ..	108
4.4.1	<i>Sleep No More</i> : The paragon of the form	110
4.5	<i>You Are Very Star</i> development process.....	112
4.5.1	Substantive emergence: resolving the inkblot-cougar problem	112
4.5.2	Procedural emergence: pushing collaborative creation to new heights	113

4.5.3	Site-specificity: blackboxes and unpredictable agents.....	114
4.5.4	A true experiment.....	115
4.5.5	Emergent processes and the normative, instrumental advantage.....	116
4.6	<i>You Are Very Star</i> (brief synopsis)	118
4.7	Audience response: life beyond the wall... ..	120
4.8	Relearning old lessons? Reflections on an ambitious experiment	125
4.8.1	Too much freedom?.....	127
4.8.2	Or not enough?.....	128
Chapter 5: Music From Somewhere.....		130
5.1	Deeper into the emergent.....	130
5.1.1	A perplexing result	131
5.2	The rise of Musical Modernism.....	133
5.2.1	The quest for absolute value.....	134
5.2.1.1	Composer as hero	134
5.2.1.2	The emergence of an industry	135
5.2.1.3	The imagined audience: social or historical?	135
5.2.1.4	The origin of value?	137
5.2.1.5	<i>Rite of Spring</i> : the paradigm case.....	138
5.3	The Zero Hour: music post-World War II	139
5.3.1	Diverging avant-gardes	139
5.3.2	Similar fates	141
5.3.3	Inescapable humanity	143
5.4	The total abdication of Giorgio Magnanensi	144
5.4.1	A deeper immanence	144
5.4.2	Process over product	145
5.4.3	The full embrace.....	146
5.4.4	Giorgio's imagined audience.....	147
5.5	Commissioned work for the GCC: <i>Teatro Dell'udito CIRS</i>	149
5.5.1	Emergent interactivity or grey-green mush?	151
5.6	Engagement? Interaction? Meaning? Agency?.....	153
5.6.1	Emancipating the audience?	154
5.6.2	Pattern seekers	155
5.7	The fully absent expert	156
5.7.1	The ironic absence of emergence.....	156
5.7.2	Misplaced purity.....	158

5.7.3	A metaphor for what?	158
Chapter 6: The Temple of the Anthropocene.....		160
6.1	Buildings or paintings?	160
6.2	A suspicion of collaborative design	161
6.3	Capitalism, lifeworlds, architecture, and sustainability.....	163
6.3.1	Architecture as a ‘model of’ and ‘model for’ the capitalist lifeworld.....	164
6.3.2	Designed intervention.....	165
6.3.3	Culture jamming in the capitalist lifeworld.....	166
6.4	Present for forever	167
6.4.1	Beyond the paradigm	167
6.4.2	Finding the leverage point.....	168
6.5	The GCC Commission: <i>A Point Subtracted</i>	169
6.5.1	Resurrection of the tomb	169
6.5.2	High-tech interactivity	170
6.5.3	The agency of the inanimate.....	171
6.6	A paradox of the sustainable world	175
6.7	Logistical difficulties of the double agent	176
6.8	Sustainability as a hole punched in the Earth?	178
6.8.1	The semiotics of <i>Spiral Jetty</i>	179
6.9	The Temple of the Anthropocene	182
6.10	Fruitful disagreements	185
Chapter 7: Art, Agency and the Non-Aesthetic		187
7.1	The strife of prescription.....	188
7.2	Distinguishing agencies: behavioural vs. ontological	189
7.2.1	Ontological agency and the aesthetic priority	192
7.2.2	What the distinction implies	193
7.3	Art as double agent.....	194
7.3.1	Convincing improvisation.....	195
7.3.2	Well-built ambivalence	195
7.4	Art as epistemology	196
7.4.1	Audible resonance	197
7.4.2	Wider echoes	199
7.4.3	‘Signal to noise ratios’	201
7.4.4	The epistemological premise in practice.....	202
7.4.5	A metaphysical implication	203

7.5	Art as meta-agent: imaginative context vs. concrete particulars	204
7.6	A few points of clarification	207
7.7	The right invitation?	210
Chapter 8: In search of the Anthropocene		212
8.1	A thorny path ahead.....	212
8.2	A metaphysics of immanence	213
8.2.1	The end of the old redemption	213
8.2.2	Paying the cost	214
8.2.3	A composite view of construction.....	215
8.2.4	Instauration (<i>encountering beings capable of worrying you</i>)	218
8.2.5	An immanent yet highly porous world?	220
8.3	Practical outcomes from the research	222
8.3.1	The Invisibles of Technology	223
8.3.2	The Four-fold path.....	225
8.3.3	Experts in the non-modern world	230
8.3.4	The Innovation-Regurgitation Spectrum.....	236
8.4	Art in the Anthropocene	240
8.4.1	Artistic ontologists and their transcendent indulgence?	240
8.4.2	Immanence in the Anthropocene	241
8.4.3	The ontological status of Steiner’s “presence”	242
8.4.4	Unlikely compatriots	245
8.4.5	As good as science or as problematic as art?	247
8.4.6	The yet still distant horizon	247
8.5	Sustainability in the Anthropocene.....	249
8.5.1	How real is the imaginary world?	249
8.5.2	Flipping the sustainability predicate: Mike Hulme and the climate change debate.....	251
8.6	Regenerative Sustainability: John Robinson and the insufficiency of ‘doing less bad’	254
8.7	Flipped Predicate and Flattened Ontology (parameters of a post-normal world)	258
8.7.1	Postscript	261
Works Cited		262
Appendices		270
Appendix A - GCC Art Channel Commission Document		270
Appendix B - Research Timeline.....		294
Appendix C - Audience Interview – table of contents – Nov 2, 2011.....		294

List of Tables

Table 3.1 The above is an attempt to place McKay's three heroes into an imagined 'assembly line' where by the thing moves through McKay's poetic action towards his thingifying aspirations.	79
Table 4.1 Narrative and character engagement.....	122
Table 4.2 Awareness of other audience lines.....	123
Table 4.3 Experience of other narrative lines.....	123

List of Figures

Figure 4.1 The opening scene of <i>You Are Very Star</i> , actress Gina Chiarelli lies on the hospital bed surrounded by the ‘guides’. An image of her brain floats above the scene.....	118
Figure 4.2 An image of two separate audience lines coming together in mutually exclusive understandings.	120
Figure 5.1 Audience participants interact with musicians through designated squares on the floor.....	132
Figure 6.1 A selection of Kaplan’s variations on the interaction between design, stone and light.....	172
Figure 6.2 The exterior of Kaplan’s design showing figures sitting on its surface, and heading towards the entrance	174
Figure 6.3 The space viewed from the interior at one point in the day. Throughout the course of the day the brightest light chimney would shift with the course of the Sun.....	174
Figure 6.4 The interior at a different time of day	175

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the tremendous support I received from my academic committee. My supervisor Dr. John Robinson, for having the audacity to welcome a piano player into his high-powered group of emerging sustainability scholars; Dr. Terre Satterfield whose intellectual breadth and rigor would have been entirely intimidating were it not for the warm and welcoming engagement and teaching; and Dr. Steven Taubeneck for rounding out my committee with such an adventurous humanities presence.

Institutionally, I am grateful for the financial support that came from the Pacific Century Scholarships, the Les Lavkulich Award, and research grants from MITACS, GRAND National Centre for Excellence, and the Pacific Institute for Climate Studies. I would also like to acknowledge the Institute for Resources, Environment, and Sustainability (IRES) within the University of British Columbia for sheltering and nurturing the quality of interdisciplinary research that it does. The challenges of sustainability, that is, the challenges of finding our way into new worlds, could not have a better ally. I am grateful for its existence.

Closer to home, the list of loved ones whose voices were present throughout this research and writing are too numerous to mention and deserve much more substantial and specific acknowledgement than would be appropriate here (I will, of course, handwrite your dedications properly in advance of your thorough reading of the work in its entirety). Generally speaking, I remain immensely thankful for your presence in my life, for doing so much to inspire an imaginative approach to reality, all the while insisting on an equally realistic approach to the imaginary.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my supervisor, John Robinson, whose intellectual curiosity and daring have provided such a challenging and inspiring approach to both questions of sustainability and questions of life. You have guided this unlikely project out from beneath deep shadows of uncertainty in ways that continue to inspire. We are many who have gone in search of your imaginary world.

What is the point of this story? What information pertains?

The thought that life could be better is woven indelibly into our hearts and our brains.

Paul Simon (Train in the Distance)

Chapter 1: Art-Sustainability relations in the late days of modernity

1.1 The right instinct, the wrong invitation?

Perhaps at its most fundamental level, this dissertation is a personal attempt to reconcile my two moral bastions, art and nature, both of which appear to be floundering in what I think of as the last days of Modernity. My background is as an artist. I grew up in the relentless world of Western classical music. Currently my professional work sits somewhere between a fairly classical approach to piano playing and a fairly radical interdisciplinary experimentation into the place of old music in a new world. In other words, what might Beethoven have to say about climate change? Over the past decade or so, this experimentation has been carried out at a festival I run in Eastern Canada. An annual five-week, fifty-performance festival that brings together the worlds of dance, theatre, literature, visual art, and music representing as many cultures and genres as we can get our hands on.

It is a lifelong conviction that art is a not altogether unsatisfying way of trying to account for being alive and this doctoral work has been one of the more gratifying instances of this belief. Nevertheless I am increasingly aware of just how much any artistic expression lies within a complex of instincts and biases when it comes to opinions about ‘artistic value’ or ‘worthy’ relationships between art and society. So it is perhaps some form of confession when I say it is a devotion to the Western traditions of fine art, its literature, music, dance, architecture, theatre, etc., that has brought me to this discussion, and whose virtues I hope to aim at the spectre of looming environmental collapse. However, as evidenced primarily by my professional work in ‘the real world’, this is not a love lacking reflexivity or marked by orthodoxies, but rather one eager to see how the values and capacities of this larger aesthetic tradition might be brought to bear on our presently dysfunctional relationships to planetary systems.

So while in one sense I am trying to flag the parameters of my own thinking clearly at the outset, in another sense, when it comes to the present challenges of sustainability, I find such parameters well struck. As the coming analysis hopes to show, key elements of the environmental crisis can reasonably be thought of as lying within these same parameters, an artifact of the same structure of beliefs, values, ontological instincts, epistemological traditions, and metaphysical foundations. They are, in short, branches of the same tree. What, then, might one offer the other?

Here at the front end of the 21st century, the challenge of environmental sustainability has blossomed into a vast domain of efforts to harmonize Western, industrialized societies with increasingly urgent environmental

priorities. Historically, the practice of sustainability has been taken up primarily within the disciplines of natural and social science, engineering, economics, and various branches of policy and legislation. When I began my doctoral studies my background within the arts and humanities felt out of place in the context of UBC's Institute for Resources, Environment, and Sustainability. This was a world of laboratories, statistics, and white papers. The practices of creative inquiry and creative expression, the preoccupations of human sentiment and imagination, that is, the arts, seemed peripheral to the serious business of saving the planet.

However, within the time I have taken to complete this doctoral study I have noticed a significant shift in sustainability efforts, one that clearly recognizes increasing value in the role of activities like the arts. At the 2012 AAAS conference (a major international gathering of the science community) several sessions were explicitly devoted to the links between art, science, and the challenges of sustainability, while other individual presentations veered in this direction of their own accord. Fundamentally, I find this growing interest in fostering a closer relationship with the arts inspiring. However, as a practising artist grounded in particular notions of what the arts might offer, I confess I usually find myself disappointed by how the relationship between art and environmental concern is typically conceived. Ultimately, I think something very promising is afoot; we just need to refine the interaction.

Broadly speaking, the invitation put to the arts from the sustainability community writ large often amounts to some sort of 'communications' role. The message of sustainability gets mapped out through scientific and political procedures and the arts are invited to step in as society's 'PR and communications' department, tasked with either making people know or making them care. Artists are, in manner of speaking, handed the facts and told to convert them into values. What I find alarming is that such an assumption seems not to be the exception, but rather the rule. Even some of the more expansive, imaginative engagements with sustainability seem to default to this pedantic invitation when it comes to the arts. For example, climate scientist Mike Hulme has put forward a bold assertion that climate issues best not be approached as a technical problem to be solved through more science and technology, but rather as an opportunity to engage with cultural and social dimensions of who we are as a species, and what kind of future we want.¹ During his talk at the AAAS conference, I was excited to see Hulme single out the arts as one of four key areas of human activity necessary to engage the climate in this way. And yet how did he conceive of their contribution? "Inspiration and Motivation."

This is not to single out an egregious example as Hulme's efforts to bring questions of climate change into a more humanist framing are extremely inspiring to my own thinking. I offer this mild criticism of how he

¹ Mike Hulme. *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction, and Opportunity*. Cambridge University Press. 2009.

articulates his belief in artistic capacity as symptomatic of a larger set of assumptions to be explored momentarily. The goal here is to identify what might be a crucial difference between the right instinct and the right invitation. Even the most inspired views of environmental issues, those whose breadth of analysis and prescription take into account the full humanness of the problem and make the inclusion of the arts inevitable, as Hulme certainly does, nevertheless follow up that inclusion with what I hope to show is a problematic account of artistic agency.

What is at stake here, and what I hope to make some progress clarifying with this research, is the difference between engaging the arts as a means to inform and engaging them as a means to explore. In other words, the difference between using the arts to teach and using the arts to learn. Using the arts to inform the public, (or motivate and inspire them) strikes me as a problematic use of this rich, subtle and necessarily unpredictable human activity. Using the arts to teach something is a very different thing than using the arts to learn something. Even the most sophisticated artists with whom I've had the pleasure of collaborating never presume to create work with the idea of teaching anyone anything. It is always an attempt to learn, to find out. Art is inquiry, the releasing of an idea, an image, a question, down into the mysterious pools of the aesthetic to see what emerges from the interactions below.

My own view of this is to say that, left to its integrity, art is an epistemology. It is a way of knowing something new, of furthering an understanding, of seeing differently. Art is not simply a tool with which to amplify what is already known. From my perspective, the arts are not a place where facts go to become values, where ideas become beliefs. Instead, the arts are a continued probing, a continued examination, and in this regard, a methodology unto themselves.

1.2 Hypothesis: a quest for better leverage

At its most general level this research explores the connection of aesthetic languages to non-aesthetic issues. It is an investigation into the relationship between art and our hopes to build better worlds. Most of us can be fairly descriptive about the positive, even transformative impact of the arts on our lives and our societies, but what happens when we become prescriptive about that role? How do we structure an intentional interaction between artistic engagement and social and environmental aspirations? Are there right and wrong ways of going about this? What can we hope to accomplish in this endeavour? And why try? Why art instead of more focus groups and scientific bulletins?

I situate these questions within the struggle to make Westernized societies more environmentally sustainable. In using the term 'the West' or 'Westernized', I am doing my best to identify contexts that have been

conditioned by ideas and practices that grew out of post-Enlightenment Western Europe. Themes of objectification, atomization, rationalization, industrialization, and commercialization factor heavily in such contexts.² A mechanistic instinct about the nature of reality tends to promote exploitative relationships with self, world, and other, fostering reductive habits of mind that pursue linear approaches to descriptive and prescriptive aspects of problem solving.³ This is not, however, an attempt to universalize such traits and ignore the endless nuances of any such context deemed ‘Western’. Rather the hope is to identify and engage pervasive themes commonly found therein.

In such contexts, the arts have long enjoyed a highly charged relationship with our imaginative lives. Through a capacity to bring us into an embodied, more-than-rational, ‘fully-felt’ engagement, they open us to the prospect that the quotidian need not be as it is, but that realms of possibility, of other ways of being, are nearer at hand than we might think. In other words, the domain of the arts is the persistence of the realm of play at a ‘meta’ level. As Sacha Kagan puts it, the arts get to play ‘with’ the rules rather than playing ‘by’ them.⁴ It is their prerogative to engage critically, imaginatively, indeed, playfully, with the way things are, provoking reflexivity as to the status quo, and inviting a level of improvisation with how we make and inhabit our worlds. Therefore my argument is that the capacity for art to create change in our ‘real’ worlds hinges on its capacity to enchant our ‘imaginary’ worlds.

My hypothesis is that a more fruitful relationship between a given issue and artistic engagement may not be found by directly targeting the issue itself but rather by engaging the larger imaginative context surrounding it - the world of which the issue is artifact. Rather than using the arts to illustrate particulars of climate change or climate action, i.e. songs about carpooling, is it possible to identify features of a larger imaginative context within which unsustainable notions of climate, self and their relationship make sense? Once identified, can we engage that imaginative context as an effective ‘leverage point’, can we shift a way of thinking, alter an instinct, foster a different imaginative inclination? And is this more effective than simply using the aesthetic domain to lend impact to the ‘facts’ of a given issue?

The risk is relevance. If the work doesn’t say the words “climate change” how will we know what it’s about? My response is to suggest that when it comes to understanding artistic agency within sustainability, this question not only misses the point, but leads down an unhelpful path, something I hope to show in a

² Loosely defined as: objectification, the tendency to establish rigid, unresponsive views of the ‘objects’ of our experience; atomization, the tendency to pursue such objectifications in isolation, rather than viewing them as dynamic entities within a larger systems view; rationalization, the tendency to prioritize rational means of knowing above other forms; industrialization, the priority of understanding planetary resources as ‘raw materials’ to be transformed into ‘goods’ using large-scale mechanized processes; commercialization, the priority of market dynamics for the establishment of value.

³ Val Plumwood. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

⁴ Sacha Kagan. “Art Effectuating Social Change: Double Entrepreneurship in Conventions” in Kagan, Sacha and Volker Kirchberg (eds.) *Sustainability: A new frontier for arts and cultures*. Frankfurt: VAS, 2008. 154.

moment. The point is not to make us more aware of climate change. The point is not to make us feel worse about climate change. The point is to initiate a set of conditions by which a different relationship with the climate is more likely than it was before. And the crux of that matter may lie beyond questions of knowledge. It may be less what we know within the present structure of the problem and more whether we can glimpse the idea that life can be lived otherwise, richly, and meaningfully. In other words, rather than resolving the dilemma of climate change, a better goal might be to render its terms inert. I will attempt to support this hypothesis with the theoretical framework that follows.

1.3 Theoretical reframing: from the informative to the imaginative

This research is part of the Greenest City Conversations (GCC) a multi-channel public engagement initiative developed by UBC and SFU faculty, focusing on sustainability engagement in Vancouver. A core theme unifying the five channels of the GCC is the effort to move away from approaches to sustainability based on information-deficit models of behaviour change that dominate so much public engagement work. The governing assumption behind such models is that behaviour change results from new information – once we know better, we make better choices. Abundant research over the past few decades has demonstrated that this is rarely the case. As a response, the GCC has attempted to foster two-way, ‘dialogical’ or ‘emergent’ approaches where various aspects of sustainability are developed and defined through emergent conversations. One of the primary goals of this research is to foster, identify and characterize these processes of emergence and ‘dialogicality’.

My particular channel situates this exploration within the arts; the production and presentation of a series of artistic works. The relationship between the arts and the environmental movement has been much-heralded. Author Bill McKibben (*The End of Nature*) put it bluntly in an online article published in Grist.org back in 2005: “What the warming world needs now is art sweet art, where are the books, the poems, the plays, the goddamn operas?”⁵ Over the past few decades, areas of practice such as eco-art, environmental art and 'art and ecology' projects have attempted to answer this call (for a review of the field see Carruthers “Mapping the Terrain of Contemporary EcoArt Practice and Collaboration” 2006).⁶

However, in more recent writing on the relationship between art and environmental concern, rhetoric has shifted from enthusiasm to increasing frustration at its apparent failure to bear fruit as anticipated. As Gunther Bachmann put it in 2008: “Theoretically, everyone talks about the importance of the arts for more

⁵ Bill McKibben. “What the Warming World Needs Now is Art Sweet Art.” In *Grist Magazine*. (2005). Available online at: <http://grist.org/article/mckibben-imagine/>. March, 2014.

⁶ Beth Carruthers. 2006. “Mapping the Terrain of Contemporary Ecoart Practice and Collaboration.” Available online at: <http://www.unesco.ca/en/activity/sciences/documents/BethCarruthersArtinEcologyResearchReportEnglish.pdf>.

sustainable thinking. Practically, it is underused, and underrated, maybe even not well understood and, worse, not well conceptualized by artists themselves.”⁷ Three years later, in 2011, I had the opportunity to ask Bill McKibbin about his impassioned call to artists. His attitude had shifted in the six years since the article was published. “I regret that” he began, explaining that following the publication of that statement he was inundated with writings and artworks from those whom he was polite enough to refer to as “well-meaning” but did use the word “terrible” at one point in his description.⁸

I don’t take this to indicate a change of heart from McKibbin, that he no longer believes in the necessity of artistic engagement with sustainability. Rather, I take this to represent further evidence of that necessary distinction between the right instinct and the right invitation. Here, a leading environmental figure called out to the arts to join the struggle for sustainability without considering *how* or to *whom* such a call should be made, without considering how that relationship should be structured. His humorous regret at the experience I take as similar to Bachmann’s comment, that despite abundant enthusiasm for the arts, and eagerness to have them involved, there is important work to be done to figure out how to bring these fields together in a more robust and ultimately fruitful way.

This research is one attempt to do that, to rethink typical art-environment interactions and explore new ways of structuring the interaction. It is an effort to turn away from the fairly well-worn path connecting art with environmental issues, and find a new, though admittedly slower and more circuitous route. In doing so, I am not proposing to eliminate the promise of other strategies for relating art to non-aesthetic issues, nor guarantee that this approach will be any better than the one I am trying to avoid. It is simply an attempt to explore an alternate route based on a sensitivity to the landscape rooted in my own experience as a working artist, along with a grounding in an increasingly prevalent view of the sustainability crisis to be discussed shortly.

In the hopes of navigating the thorny issues of art, social change, environmental thought, and their potential interactions, I have identified several ‘check points’ to guide the exploration: First, information deficit models and the instrumentalization of art; second, art as ontological reflexivity; and third, Bruno Latour and the dichotomies of Modernism, i.e. subject-object, fact-value, culture-nature. These three sections aim to problematize the present art-environment relationship in its typical form, then make an argument for what sort of a thing art is when considered within my previously identified cultural bias—Western, classical, etc.—and, lastly, make an argument for what sort of a thing the sustainability problem is as seen from the

⁷ Günter Bachmann. 2008. *Gatekeeper: A Forward*. in Kagan, Sacha and Volker Kirchberg (eds.) *Sustainability: A new frontier for arts and cultures*. Frankfurt: VAS. 8.

⁸ Question and answer session with Bill McKibbin, Liu Centre for Dialogue, UBC, November, 2011.

perspective of an artist looking for the 'right fit'. With any luck, these sections will serve to compliment one another effectively enough to open a path that connects art to sustainability in a new and invigorating way.

1.3.1 Information Deficit Models and the instrumentalization of art

1.3.1.1 An enduring faith in knowing better

I begin with the argument that a central problem endemic to so much art-environment interaction lies in its connection to a larger conceptual approach to sustainability known as 'information deficit models of behaviour change'. In 'rationalized' societies such as ours, there is a tenacious assumption that undesirable behaviours stem from ignorance.⁹ *If only we knew better, we'd do better*. It describes a linear approach to righting our wrongs: new information changes our attitudes and our values, and a shift in these prompts a change in our behaviour. This model has dominated environmental concern thanks to "a genuine belief among policymakers and others that *information* is the key to public involvement and action."¹⁰ Unfortunately, subsequent research has sullied such a tidy assumption, as all too often "increases in knowledge and awareness [do] not lead to pro-environmental behaviour."¹¹ A sufficient map of behaviour change turns out to be far more complex than this approach surmised. For example, Steg and Vlek's 2009 review of research affecting pro-environmental behaviour identifies dense layers of cost/benefit perceptions, moral convictions, and normative concerns, along with affective, symbolic, contextual and habitual factors.¹² Allum and Sturgis (2004) detail the importance of the issue's familiarity to public consciousness, where information holds greater agency in nascent controversies but this recedes as issues mature, galvanize, etc.¹³

Despite such evidence, an overly optimistic use of information-deficit models persists: "Today, most environmental NGOs still base their strategies on the simplistic assumption that more knowledge will lead to more enlightened behaviour."¹⁴ And while this may seem odd at first, it is in fact consistent with the critique of information deficit models itself. The best way to explain the disconnect between knowing that information deficit models don't work and the fact that we keep using them anyway, is to notice that the information describing such failure has little impact. In other words, proof that information deficit models are inadequate is the provision of several decades of information that information deficit models are inadequate and the subsequent observation of how little impact this has on our use of information deficit models.

⁹ Harries-Jones, Peter. *A Recursive Vision: Ecological Understanding and Gregory Bateson*. Toronto: U of T Press, 1995. 50.

¹⁰ Owens, S. "Engaging the public: information and deliberation in environmental policy." *Environment and Planning A*, 32(7). (2000): 1141.

¹¹ Kollmuss, A. & Agyeman, J. "Mind the gap: Why do people act environmentally and what are the barriers to pro-environmental behaviour?" *Environmental Education Research* 8(3) (2002): 241.

¹² L. Steg, C. Vlek. Encouraging pro-environmental behaviour: An integrative review and research agenda. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 29 (2009): 310-313

¹³ Patrick Sturgis and Nick Allum. "Science in society: re-evaluating the deficit model of public attitudes." *Public Understanding of Science*. 13 (2004): 55-74.

¹⁴ Kollmuss, A. & Agyeman, J. 2002. 241.

Thus much of the effort to create more sustainable societies remains focused on spreading the message. Not surprisingly then, given the expressive power of the aesthetic domain, the arts appear as an ideal communicative tool. Art takes on the expectations of information-deficit models, where message-driven, content specific engagement is expected to provoke behaviour change. I suggest that this fails in two ways, and understanding both will help track a new path towards art-environment interactions.

First, as has been pointed out by Burgess¹⁵ (1998), Owens¹⁶ (2000), Kollmuss and Agyeman¹⁷ (2002), Sturgis and Allum (2004), Steg and Vlek (2009) and others, changing people's behaviour is more complex than raising awareness, no matter how expressive one's efforts. In an important sense then, the arts have been sent on a fool's errand, a task that cannot be completed, not because of features intrinsic to the arts *per se*, but because of the governing logic they have been asked to follow. Here the failure is instrumental, not as art but as 'tool'. In this respect, any informative enterprise aiming at behaviour change, whether employing the arts or not, might consider carefully its prospects of success.

1.3.1.2 Disenchanted the aesthetic

However, the shortcomings of this approach may go beyond overestimating the capacity of information to encounter deeper problems with the very conception of 'art as tool'. While it may be that a non-instrumental use of art in some pure sense is nonexistent—that we always make art with some outcome in mind—linking the creative process ever more tightly to instrumental agendas risks precluding the aesthetic domain as a genuine space of exploration. The use of art as an expressive tool for non-aesthetic issues will likely dismiss the spirit and process of discovery at the outset. Or in simple terms: tell art what to say and we will get art that says that. And we won't get art that says anything new. The opportunity to discover what we don't already know will, in all likelihood, be lost.

For this reason, message-driven, content-specific art runs the risk of losing its status as epistemological instrument, a means of knowing unto itself. Here the aesthetic is not engaged to see where it might lead, but to proceed towards an assigned destination. This, I feel, disenchant the very power for which the help of art was sought in the first place. Any comprehensive account as to why this might be the case would surely lead into realms too mystical for a theoretical framework (although George Steiner's *Real Presences* is a valiant and inspiring effort). What makes a work 'powerful' is beyond the scope of this analysis and likely beyond the

¹⁵ Burgess J, Harrison C, Filius P. "Environmental communication and the cultural politics of environmental citizenship" *Environment and Planning A* 30 (1998): 1445 -1460.

¹⁶ Owens, S. "Engaging the public: information and deliberation in environmental policy, *Environment and Planning A* 32(7) (2000): 1141–1148.

¹⁷ Kollmuss, A. & Agyeman, J. "Mind the gap: Why do people act environmentally and what are the barriers to pro-environmental behaviour?" *Environmental Education Research* 8(3) (2002): 239–260.

scope of analysis in general. However, with the larger concerns in mind, there seem to be two issues worth raising, one internal to the creative process itself, the second, concerned with idioms of reception.

As mentioned briefly in the introduction, there is a sense that the aesthetic dimension has a logic and agency of its own, and that art-making is fundamentally responsive to that agency. Creativity is, in a sense, conjectural, awaiting resonance from the aesthetic dimension itself. For renowned scholar of comparative literature, George Steiner, the agency of the aesthetic dimension, that which creativity responds to in its pursuit of itself, is fundamental to both the creation and consumption of art. Within the realm of creation, Steiner argues, “even the most penetrative, concordant response will encounter an irreducible ‘otherness’.”¹⁸

This ‘otherness’, the agency of the aesthetic domain that the creative act responds to and reflects through its response, surely loses its capacity to participate in creative processes too closely tied to any a priori message or agenda. Necessary wanderings, experimentation, play and improvisation are curtailed, muting the essential elements of inspiration, chance, and discovery. This suggests an inherently emergent quality to the genuine creative process, an iterative dynamic between an initiating idea, interest, or curiosity, and the techniques, training, and traditions of the practice, the materials at hand, the cultural milieu, its idioms of consumption, etc. along with the less tangible forces that reside within the human drive to create.¹⁹ We are not engaging the creative process in good faith when we know too well where we want this emergent dynamic to arrive, when we know what needs to be said and why. The agency of the other factors is denied and the essential unpredictability of creativity eliminated.

This translates directly to the relationship such work has with its public, according to Steiner, as the audience approaches a work in the same spirit as its creator. We are there to hear from, to see, to witness, that same encounter with presence, or otherness. We *trust* art in the way that we do, in other words, I would suggest that we allow a certain ‘beauty-truth’ correlate, because the creative act allows us to feel that larger presence. Our faith is that creativity is in a crucial sense ‘discovery’, rather than mere fabrication:

In turn, it is our apprehension of this essence within but also ‘behind’ presentness and representation in the aesthetic which, indispensably, is the condition of trust. *We yield rights of possession* to the fictions of literature, to the iconic suggestions placed in us by the painter, to the life-beat of the music; *we collaborate*, to the best of our receptive and commemorative means, in the regeneration and

¹⁸ George Steiner. *Real Presences*. London: Faber and Faber, 1989. 210.

¹⁹ In an effort to avoid getting too sidetracked by the unending conjecture into the creative drive of ‘humanity’, I am glossing this point slightly. Steiner goes into a detailed exploration of the theme throughout *Real Presences*. His basic thesis is that the human capacity to question ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’ makes a deep, existential fetish of creation itself, one which we explore and engage with through an endless echoing of human creativity. Thus the drive to create is a drive to seek that space before there ‘was’, the moment, the presence, the ‘presentness’ of otherness, (or its ultimate absence as we shall see). What was before there was self and world.

perpetuation of the artist's work, precisely to the extent that we too experience the unmastered 'thereness' of a secret sharer, of *a priori* creation with and against which the art-act has been effected.²⁰

That spirit of collaboration is the same kind of responsiveness we assume based on a condition of trust, trust that the artists themselves assumed a similar responsiveness in the creative process that produced what we are witnessing.

This compression of Steiner's arguments risks evoking the aesthetic dimension as some kind of oracle, a supernatural clarifying agency for human longing and inquiry. Unfortunately for humanity, clarity is not what lies at the heart of this process. Instead, that presence—so Steiner's sphinx-like argument goes—is in essence, an absence, an ultimate lack of clarifying concreteness. Yet it is this ultimate absence that allows us to feel that otherness, the presence of agency of something beyond mere human representation. This theme will be elaborated throughout the duration of this study. For now, Steiner evokes it thus:

A good reading falls short of the text or art object by a distance, by a perimeter of inadequacy which are themselves luminous as is the corona around the darkened sun. The falling-short is a guarantor of the experienced 'otherness'—the freedom to be or not to be, to enter into or abstain from a commerce of spirit with us—in the poem, the painting, the piece of music.²¹

The idea of an 'illuminating perimeter of inadequacy' obviously does little to replace infocentric art with the kind of clarity behavioural aspirations might have hoped for. But it does well to articulate why art is at once so powerful and so elusive.

Art bearing the message of its agenda cannot help but signal its audience to this effect, betraying Steiner's condition of trust. Do we then fail to grant agency to the aesthetic expression through a withheld suspension of disbelief, a refusal to be moved? My suggestion is that once that condition of trust is broken or absent, the work has little hope of engaging our aesthetic sensibilities, our emotive and embodied responses, thus preventing the communicative enterprise to get any further than our conscious, rational faculties. But I doubt that such a response is any sort of active defensive mechanism, that at the hint of a non-aesthetic agenda we move to *reinsert* a rational filter in front of the experience. Rather, I suggest that if the work is overly message-driven we engage it as such. Rationally, not aesthetically. So the thought here is not to say informative art cannot inform, surely it can, but that in doing so it suffers the same fate as any other informative enterprise. What it cannot do, or at least has a greatly reduced chance of doing, is to engage our embodied, emotive, pre-

²⁰ Steiner, 1989. 211

²¹ Steiner, 1989. 175.

or meta-rational space of engagement, to pull us into that more fundamental condition of wondering about the world. Which, one assumes, was the very reason art was being used rather than flip-charts.

1.3.2 Art as ontological reflexivity

The use of art as a means to achieve political or social ends (as opposed to the use of social or political terrain for aesthetic exploration) has a Marxist flavour to it.²² It is perhaps a little ironic then, that neo-Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse adamantly rejected such an approach, arguing it “had devastating consequences for aesthetics”²³ and completely misunderstood the role of art in social change.²⁴

The political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension. Its relation to praxis is inexorably indirect, mediated, and frustrating. The more immediately political the work of art, the more it *reduces* the power of estrangement and the radical transcendent goals of change. In this respect, there may be more subversive potential in the poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud than in the didactic plays of Brecht.²⁵

For Marcuse, this necessarily ‘indirect’ and ‘frustrating’ agency of the aesthetic rests with the imaginative, subjective dimensions of its audience. It is art’s capacity to offer us another rationality, another sensitivity that lends it political agency.²⁶ “Art breaks open a dimension in which human beings, nature, and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality.”²⁷ For Marcuse, the agency of art is to confound established conceptions and conventions of present realities and lure the imagination into new ways of conceiving of self and world.

Contemporary scholar Hans Dieleman refers to this as ‘ontological reflexivity’.²⁸ Ontological reflexivity, he says, “deals with an understanding of ‘what is’ using lateral thinking and intuitive methods of exploration. Ontological reflexivity explores the reality around us but is not limited to a specific systematic methodology like the sciences, and has more space for associations and imagination.”²⁹ In developing the idea further, Dieleman identifies art as the appropriate methodology for fostering ontological reflexivity:

²² Herbert Marcuse. *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. Random House. 1978. 1-2.

²³ Marcuse, 1978. 3.

²⁴ Abromeit, John and W. Mark Cobb. Introduction. In John Abromeit and W. Mark Cobb (eds.) *Herbert Marcuse – the critical reader*. Routledge: NY, 2004. 21-22.

²⁵ Marcuse 1978. xxii.

²⁶ Marcuse, 1978, 7, 9.

²⁷ Marcuse 1978. 72.

²⁸ Hans, Dieleman. 2008. “Sustainability, Art and Reflexivity” in Kagan, Sacha and Volker Kirchberg (eds.) *Sustainability: A new frontier for arts and cultures*. Frankfurt: VAS. 118.

²⁹ Dieleman, 118.

Ontological reflexivity transcends boundaries and is able to escape the limitations of scientific and technical rationality. It facilitates seeing our complex reality in more holistic terms, combining and linking ways of seeing, knowing and being. The reflexive capital is a capital of creating spaces of experience and imagination. It uses the language of forms and metaphors, images, music, theatre, and the like. In this type of reflexivity, artists are par excellence, the appropriate change agents.³⁰

Two important assertions are made by this statement: First, that a given *reality* is, in fact, a given *rationality*, a particular mode of thinking and perceiving structured by historical and methodological priorities, and therefore fragmented, partial, and limiting. Second, transcending such limitations can be contingent on non-rational ways of knowing because rationality is predominantly an instrument of the larger paradigm in question. The rationality of a given reality is rational thanks to its allegiance to the assumptions and values of that reality. Art is well equipped to foster reflexivity in such a context thanks to its non-rational techniques of exploration and engagement – images, metaphors, sounds, shapes, sentiments, etc.

Steiner makes a very similar point:

The encounter with the aesthetic is, together with certain modes of religious and of metaphysical experience, the most ‘ingressive’, transformative summons available to human experiencing. Again, the shorthand image is that of an Annunciation, of “a terrible beauty” or gravity breaking into the small house of our cautionary being. If we have heard rightly the wing-beat and provocation of that visit, the house is no longer habitable in quite the same way as it was before. A mastering intrusion has shifted the light.³¹

That is to say, rationality and its attendant realities—our ‘cautionary being’—are vulnerable to the terrible beauties of the aesthetic. For Steiner, this subversive capacity is the very essence of the artistic gesture: “Deep inside every ‘art-act’ lies the dream of an absolute leap out of nothingness, of the invention of an enunciatory shape so new, so singular to its begetter, that it would, literally, leave the previous world behind.”³² Art offers a glimpse into that presence beyond the immediacy of conception and representation whereby we are confronted with the shortcomings of our ontologies, our rationalities, our realities.

1.3.2.1 A phenomenological view of ontological reflexivity

In her lecture *On Beauty* (1998), Elaine Scarry offers another layer to this characterization of the agency of art.

³⁰ Dieleman, 136.

³¹ Steiner, 1989.143.

³² Steiner, 1989. 202.

Building on the work of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, Scarry attempts to describe this sort of transformative moment in action, connecting the experience of beauty to what Weil referred to as ‘radical decentering’ and Murdoch referred to as ‘unselfing’.

At the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering. Beauty, according to Simone Weil, requires us to “give up our imaginary position as the center... A transformation then takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions.”³³

I equate this to Dieleman’s ontological reflexivity as it describes a shift in one’s sense of self, one’s account of the world, and one’s place within it. Scarry continues:

[Encounters with beauty] lift us ... letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land, we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand at the centre of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the centre of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us.”³⁴

For Iris Murdoch such ‘unselfing’ moves us towards what she calls ‘good moral conduct’ as it alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness. And as she says, “the most obvious thing in our surroundings which is an occasion for ‘unselfing’ is what is popularly called beauty.”³⁵

In trying to ground this elaboration of ontological reflexivity I find an appeal to the phenomena convincing. On numerous occasions I have entrenched myself in some position according to my own determined account of right and wrong—my sister owed me an apology and would have to yield eventually; my friend would come to understand he had messed up and would step forward to make amends—in such cases my position was based on a set interpretation of events. This interpretation grew out of a particular sense of self and was founded on a conviction about what was necessary for the world to go on being just. But then, as described above, a simple encounter with beauty dissolved all reckoning. A sense of self awoke in my own mind that suddenly viewed the position I had diligently staked out as unnecessary. In its place, a sentiment, a language, a gesture, came easily to mind, carrying a renewed image of self that did not require defending, that did not

³³ Elaine Scarry. “On Beauty” *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*. March, 1998. 77. Available online at <http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/documents/scarry00.pdf>.

³⁴ Scarry. 1998. 77.

³⁵ Scarry. 1998. 78.

demand victory, or justice, or retribution, and that could not understand the deep investment of my prior position. A dilemma *dissolved* rather than resolved.

This description is not meant to cover all possible variations of ontological reflexivity. Nor does it specify art as the only vector of such agency. I offer it here as one lived account, though certainly the full range of ontological reflexivity is not always so black and white, nor need it be quite so epiphanal. This illustration is meant only to give a sense of the kind of displacement a non-rational encounter can serve a rational position, and to show that, once displaced, the reasoned argument has trouble regaining any purchase on our imaginations.

1.3.2.2 Heidegger and the ontological agency of art

Perhaps one of the most influential thinkers to establish this relationship between art, ontological reflexivity, and one's grasp of reality was Martin Heidegger. Heidegger figures centrally in the ideas implied in Dieleman's statement quoted above—that our reality is in fact our rationality, contingent on the subjectivity of history, method, and perspective. Heidegger offers one of the more illuminating articulations of reality as a deeply subjective phenomenon, standing as “a relentless enemy of ahistorical, absolutist concepts of truth” in the words of Graham Harman.³⁶ For Heidegger this deep subjectivity of our realities enables us to function within them. We get around in our worlds not because we are particularly dexterous rule-followers, not because we understand the operational properties of the objects that populate our everyday, but because “we are that within which we operate.” Self and world are conjoined in pre-conscious, pre-reflective familiarity where one is constantly producing the other, hammer and carpenter, broker and market.

Heidegger usually illustrates this idea in tool use, hammers notoriously. Our tools manifest this ontological agency over ourselves (i.e. ‘what kind of a thing am I?’) not so much because we ‘know’ how to use them, but because we know how to *be users* of them. His notion of the ‘ready-to-hand’ identifies tools that are a seamless part of our being (smartphones are compelling examples nowadays). Again, this is not primarily a matter of skill, of aptitude, or comfort with the item, but because both self and tool are embedded within a cascade of “in-order-tos”: We swing a hammer *in order to* drive a nail, *in order to* build a roof, *in order to* shelter our family. This cascade inhabits our being in the way that it does not because of an instrumental agenda driving our action but because of an existential anchoring point, a fundamental “for-the-sake-of-which” that is our identity, “for the sake of being a father” for example.³⁷ In this, the ontology of the hammer is rooted in this larger more fundamental self-understanding and that self-understanding is inextricable from that tool.

³⁶ Richard Polt. *Heidegger: an introduction*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 1999. 5.

³⁷ See lecture by Hubert Dreyfus, “The Worldhood of the World II”. *Philosophy 185, Heidegger*. available online at: https://archive.org/details/Philosophy_185_Fall_2007_UC_Berkeley. February, 2014.

1.3.2.2.1 world/earth tensions

However tight this recursivity between mind and world is, it is not a closed system. One's specific historical and cultural world does not represent a limit to human access, human imagination. Beneath the immediacies of one's conceptual framework lie hidden yet retrievable depths. As Harman puts it, "most of Heidegger's philosophy is dominated by endless repetitions of a single recurrent duel between concealed and revealed, sheltering and clearing... the realms of shadow and visibility."³⁸ These realms are referred to by Heidegger as 'world' (the visible) and 'earth' (the concealed) in his essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art':

The world is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people. The earth is the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing.³⁹

The realms of world and earth lie in tension within a single being, as Heidegger says, "different from one another and yet are never separated."⁴⁰ For me, the image of an iceberg is helpful, with 'world' being the ice above the surface, and 'earth' all that lurks beneath the water. This captures the interdependence Heidegger evokes: "the world grounds itself on the earth and earth juts through world." The relationship is always in tension, "the relation between world and earth does not wither away into the empty unity of opposites unconcerned with one another. The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it. As self-opening it cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there."⁴¹ This tension between the specificity of one's conceptual framework and historical reference, is contrasted with the possibility of new insight, new understanding, new frameworks, and an agency of things capable of resisting and surprising us.⁴²

For Heidegger, things are "never fully visible, definable, or describable", meaning no account is ever absolute. "The only way to get at the depths of the world is through interpretation, not direct vision", meaning no account is ever objective, or even possible *without the hermeneutic agency of human subjectivity*.⁴³ That is to say, failing to perceive this world/earth tension, gazing at a waxing moon without grasping what lies in shadow,

³⁸ Graham Harman. *Heidegger Explained*. Open Court Books. 2007.83.

³⁹ Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hopfstadter, trans. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. 47.

⁴⁰ Heidegger, 1975. 47.

⁴¹ Heidegger, 1975. 47.

⁴² Within a sustainability discussion like this one, these terms may be unhelpful (though not what they indicate). Heidegger's 'earth', it should be pointed out, is in no way 'planetary', it does not refer to ecosystems, or the natural 'other', or wilderness in the sense of untamed, undomesticated nature (and yet it perhaps pulls a certain association from this idea, as we will see in the coming chapter on the poetry of Don McKay). It simply indicates what lies outside our ontological account of something, what lies beyond our epistemological reach, but not, crucially, our imaginative reach.

⁴³ Harman, 2007. 48.

risks misunderstanding not only the object of our attention, but more importantly, ourselves.⁴⁴ The essence of being human is to live astride the ‘ontological difference’ between the shadowy depths of ‘earth’—where ‘being’ lies⁴⁵—and the present, public, shared narrations of our ‘worlds’, that is, the domain of beings: “As [Heidegger] put it, we will have radical and serious phenomenology only when people see that direct presence of the world is never possible, and that concealment belongs to the very nature of phenomena.”⁴⁶ In other words, we will properly experience being in the world when we understand that any world is both an incomplete account of the full range of its being, and one that is necessarily inclusive of, and dependent on, our own hermeneutic agency, as something we are actively producing by being in it.

1.3.2.2.2 Tools vs. Art

For Heidegger, our primary means of awakening to the ontological difference and heightening our awareness of the earth/world tension inherent in our realities, is art. As he says, “while metaphysics and science remain trapped on the surface-world of presence...Poetry is greater than science because poetry hints into the depths, and as we have seen already, hinting is the only way to approach these depths.”⁴⁷ So the point here is not simply to trace the pedigree of the account of artistic agency held by Marcuse and Dieleman, but to further specify why art is so germane to this challenge. Heidegger explains this by distinguishing tool-making from art-making.

When we invent a new tool we rupture the fabric of the present world by pulling something from the hidden depths, we ‘world’ a bit of ‘earth’. We invent the compass, the light bulb, the computer, and in doing so, change both our world and the possibilities of self along with it. The difference between this process and the making of art is that when we make equipment the ‘earth’ is, as Heidegger says, “used up.”⁴⁸ There is no remaining presence of the shadowed, concealed realm in the ‘world-as-equipment’, the new world of this tool, is as self-sealed as the world that preceded it, “because it is determined by its usefulness and serviceability.”⁴⁹ It is self-evident. “The material [earth] is all the better and more suitable *the less it resists perishing* in the equipmental being of the equipment.” In other words, a hammer's destiny is to pound nails.

When we make art however, there is a desire for the material, the ‘earth’, to *resist* perishing in the artwork, a paradoxical ambition to illuminate the shadow, to hold on to the persistence of its darkness:

⁴⁴ Polt, 1999. 90

⁴⁵ Being in this case not in the sense of individual beings, but, as William Blattner says, “that which “determines entities as entities,” that “in terms of which entities are already intelligible as entities.” See Blattner’s “Terminology in Being and Time” available online at: <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/blattnew/heid/terms.htm>

⁴⁶ Harman, 2007. 33

⁴⁷ Harman, 2007. 107.

⁴⁸ Heidegger, 1975. 44.

⁴⁹ Heidegger, 1975. 44.

The sculptor uses stone just as the mason uses it, in his own way. But he does not use it up...the painter also uses pigment, but in such a way that colour is not used up but rather only now comes to shine forth. To be sure, the poet also uses the word – not, however, like ordinary speakers and writers who have to use them up, but rather in such a way that the word only now becomes and remains truly a word.⁵⁰

"Truly a word" meaning the word composed of both its stable reference and its layered possibilities—'world' and 'earth'—pulling us towards its sense-making, hermeneutic potential while at the same time sending us beyond, into the uncapturable aspects of its evocation. In concrete terms, if we are writing down instructions, it is our singular priority to use a word in such a way that conveys a specific meaning as cleanly and clearly as possible. We do not wish the reader to wonder at the various possibilities of what is meant. We do not want the reading of instructions to be an interpretive act. When we write a poem however, there is a desire to allow the language to point both at our intended meaning while simultaneously illuminating unrealized possibilities that lie beneath the particulars of our own meanings, our own narratives, and our own worlds.

Like making tools, making art is a worlding act. But unlike a tool, the work "does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth for the very first time and to come into the Open of the work's world."⁵¹ The 'earth' of our 'worlds' "appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is by nature undisclosable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up."⁵² Though the work of art can reveal its existence, the concealed realm must always remain so. Art is unique because "the work moves the earth itself into the Open of a world and keeps it there. *The work lets the earth be an earth.*"⁵³

Here the connection of this account to the concept of art offered earlier in the ideas of George Steiner is apparent. Steiner's sense of 'otherness' that is 'present' in its absence has strong Heideggerian overtones. Where Heidegger sets up a world/earth tension to articulate the difference between the historical, realized, referenced world and all its uncaptured, unrealized, hidden being beneath, Steiner offers the notion of "semantic incommensurability", identifying the inability of any representative gesture to fully capture the object in question. Like Heidegger (whom Steiner has written about extensively) Steiner identifies art as a primary means by which the 'world/earth' difference is experienced. However, Steiner goes further, to suggest it is the very essence of art to exploit that difference: "I would define literature (art, music) as *the*

⁵⁰ Heidegger, 1975. 46.

⁵¹ Heidegger, 1975. 45.

⁵² Heidegger, 1975. 46. This perhaps explains why 'earth' was a replacement term for what Heidegger had originally called 'the nothing' along with its verb form - "the essential strife whereby the "nothing noths" see Thompson, Iain. 2010.

⁵³ Heidegger, 1975. 45.

maximalization of semantic incommensurability in respect of the formal means of expression. Here an object, the description of whose formal components can be finite, demands and produces infinite response.”⁵⁴ Art, in its capacity to bring us into an encounter with all that lies ‘beyond’ conceptualization—that presence/absence sensation where we can both know and feel something more, yet cannot fully conceptualize or articulate it—enables a stabilization of that awareness of something more while refusing any attempt to secure it in semantic terms.

I find the following quote from Steiner useful in characterizing this relationship of art to the larger metaphysical considerations offered by Heidegger.

Beyond the strength of any other act of witness, literature and the arts tell of the obstinacies of the impenetrable, of the absolutely alien which we come up against in the labyrinth of intimacy. They tell of the minotaur at the heart of love, of kinship, of uttermost confiding. It is the poet, the composer, the painter, it is the religious thinker and metaphysician when they give to their findings the persuasion of form, who instruct us that we are monads haunted by communion. They tell us of the irreducible weight of otherness, of enclosedness, in the texture and phenomenality of the material world. Only art can go some way towards making accessible, towards waking into some measure of communicability, the sheer inhuman otherness of matter—it haunted Kant—the retractions out of reach of rock and wood, of metal and of fibre.⁵⁵

This giving form to an ultimate absence secures the capacity of art to always point beyond, to worlds unknown, unworlded, possibilities beyond that both invite and require us. This theme will return with greater clarity in the closing chapter of this discussion.

For now, the distinction between tool-making and art-making adds further depth to the distinction I was trying to establish at the outset of this discussion—my opinions on the ‘proper use of art’—a distinction that hinges on the difference between art made to teach and art made to learn. Aesthetic expression that veers too close to an instrumental agenda represents a morphing of art into tool. In doing so such expression likely forgoes its capacity to ‘hold forth the earth’ (or, to relieve ourselves from Heideggerianisms for a moment, offer *reflexivity* about one’s rationality). In contrast, art made in the spirit of learning, of exploration, takes on a responsive posture in search of ‘earth’, in search of the hidden depths to a thing’s being and thus stands a better chance at fostering Dieleman’s ontological reflexivity, or Marcuse’s encounter with another reality, another rationality.

⁵⁴ Steiner, 1989. 83.

⁵⁵ Steiner, 1989. 139-140.

1.3.3 Raulet's critique: a scrutiny of agency

In the interest of balancing this argument, I went looking for theoretical perspectives that push against this conception, that argue *for* the use of art to direct information at a public in the name of fostering a desired change in behaviour. Despite the abundance of practice in this direction, theoretical arguments for its efficacy are scarce.⁵⁶ A possible explanation for this may parallel the earlier disconnect between theory and practice in information deficit models of public engagement strategies. I doubt it is a situation of practitioners dismissing the absence of supportive theoretical frameworks. Rather, I suggest that we are so deeply conditioned by the layered assumptions of 'rational actors' and the role of information that we distill problems into infocentric castings without realizing it.

Take as an example the Greenest City Conversations team of researchers. This group was assembled around the principle of working outside of infocentric models. Yet when turning to the performing arts channel infocentric expectations were immediate, though I'm sure unconscious. All it took for a collective infocentrism to resurface was the translation from the practice familiar to individual researchers, where the particulars of not proceeding in such a manner are already well-established in their minds, into some new terrain, where the idioms and approaches were unfamiliar. Just as we get used to uprooting the weeds of infocentrism in our own yard, we replant them elsewhere.

That is not to say that there are no worthwhile critiques of what I am putting forward here under the heading 'art as ontological reflexivity.' One doesn't have to be a determined infocentric to take issue with linking art, ontological reflexivity, and social change. One can simply accept a relationship that holds between the first two terms, and fails to capture the third outright. That is, to accept art's capacity to foster such reflexivity in our imaginative landscapes and then simply ask 'so what?' As Gerard Raulet suggests, "the crucial question in this context is whether this [aesthetic] dimension can in fact ... be a sphere of mediation."⁵⁷ Can art mediate? Can it step between citizen and world and create difference? Raulet doesn't think so. "Marcuse's offensive against 'a certain Marxist aesthetics' thus becomes the pretense for a defensive strategy of withdrawal, one that succeeds in establishing the unique nature of the aesthetic, only at the cost of renouncing its basis and

⁵⁶ Certainly what does exist is literature outlining the use of art to achieve a variety of social goals (as opposed to aesthetic ones). This will be discussed in chapter 2 and is similar in that an instrumental agenda is being applied to art in the name of accomplished non-aesthetic outcomes but different in that it is not aligning art with info-deficit models of behaviour change. Predominantly such socially-minded art-making practices are focused on therapeutic elements of expressivity, togetherness, other modes of knowing, etc.

⁵⁷ Gerard Raulet. "Marcuse's Negative Dialectics of Imagination." In John Abromeit and W. Mark Cobb (eds.) *Herbert Marcuse – the critical reader*. Routledge: NY, 2004. 114.

effectiveness in reality.”⁵⁸ In other words, art retreats to the imaginative dimension of ourselves and our societies where it may be both triumphant and inert.

For his part, Marcuse does not disagree with renouncing art’s agency at the level of practice:

Art by itself cannot under any circumstances change the social condition. And that is the necessary and essential powerlessness of art, that it cannot have an effective, direct impact on the praxis of change. I don't know of any case in which you could say that art has changed the established society.⁵⁹

Yet he disagrees with Raulet’s claim that occupying our subjective, imaginative dimensions is a retreat that renders art ineffectual: “Art as art expresses a truth, an experience, a necessity which, although not in the domain of radical praxis, are nevertheless essential components of revolution.”⁶⁰ Elsewhere he follows the spirit of this remark with the claim that “art can prepare such [social] change. Art can contribute to it only via several negations and mediations, the most important being the change of consciousness and, especially, the change of perception.”⁶¹

I can do no better than to leave this point hanging as I will not address it directly with this research. As I will discuss further on in the methods section, an investigation of action and agency in the wake of increased reflexivity is not within the scope of this study. I remain committed to avoiding the path of infocentric art bearing an instrumental agenda to teach, or inspire, or motivate a population to move towards predetermined values. But I accept the risk of Raulet’s critique. A novel subjective landscape may open up through a different means of fostering the relationship between art and environmental concern, this landscape may originate and germinate in the fictional realm of our subjective, imaginative dimensions, and then stay there, while realities of practice carry on unaffected. Raulet’s critique remains useful both to raise the question of practice and also to keep my own argument honest. If I slandered ‘information’ for its inability to single-handedly shift behavior, then surely ‘imagination’ (in this Marcusean sense), is subject to similar limitations - a vital but insufficient condition of change

I hope this serves to clarify where I expect the point of agency in the ‘art and social change interaction’ to lie and to justify proceeding along the lines of Marcuse, Dieleman, Scarry, Weil, Murdoch, Steiner, and Heidegger. It strikes me that there are at least three good reasons that allow us to accept Raulet’s worthwhile

⁵⁸ Gerard Raulet. 2004. 123.

⁵⁹ Larry Hartwick. “On the Aesthetic Dimension: A Conversation with Herbert Marcuse.” *Contemporary Literature* 22(1981), 417-424. or available online at <http://www.marcuse.org/herbert/pubs/70spubs/78InterviewAesthDim.htm>

⁶⁰ Marcuse 1978. 1.

⁶¹ Hartwick interview, <http://www.marcuse.org/herbert/pubs/70spubs/78InterviewAesthDim.htm>

critique yet forge on nonetheless: First, by exploring this approach, it is not as though we are calling any triumphant Marxist art-environment interactions into retreat. This exploration is a response to frustration with such approaches cited at the outset and so we aren't retracting artworks that *have* been triumphant within the reality of practice. Secondly, there is broad evidence supporting the agency of ontological reflexivity and refuting Raulet's suggestion that our subjective, imaginative dimensions are inert vis a vis realities of practice, that in fact such dimensions are deeply relevant to how we act in the world.⁶² Third, there is evidence that realities of practice within more progressive sustainability initiatives have already progressed beyond our typical subjective, imaginative dimensions. As we will see, the reality of practice has already begun to change, so it may be less a need to use art to provoke behaviour change, but rather to explore the themes, experiences, and ontologies of progressive practices as part of a larger shift in imaginative orientation.

1.3.4 Sustainability in an imaginary world?

Taking this discussion of art, ontological reflexivity, and 'reality as rationality', and rejoining considerations of environmental concern, provokes what might seem a slightly curious question: Is the challenge of sustainability a challenge to prove the world real, or a challenge to prove the world imaginary? Certainly the push from most environmental movements features a determination to prove the world real. Count the hectares, calculate the parts per million, table the footprints, and tell people what to do. It's a noble endeavour, save for one problem. We are human, and in a very real way, we don't live in the real world. We live in the worlds we imagine.

Any grasp of 'reality' is mediated by the thick lens of a worldview bathed in the grime of personal experience. Gregory Bateson, anthropologist, communications scholar, systems theorist, amongst other things, spent much of his career analyzing practices of representation.⁶³ This was, for him, a means to an epistemic scepticism, an assertion that we only ever make maps of maps, "the territory never gets in."⁶⁴ Our best efforts at 'realizing' the world are, through and through, heroic acts of imagination. At a societal scale this has been illustrated by fields like Science and Technology Studies, or the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge, adding empirical depth to Thomas Kuhn's basic premise that the paradigm within which a population exists bears heavily on the facts it uses to describe its reality. Different paradigm, different facts.⁶⁵ At the scale of the individual, this idea, along with its complicating effects on action and agency, has been illustrated by Dorothy

⁶² Abundant work from anthropologist Dorothy Holland under her heading 'identity and agency' is just one robust exploration of the links between our subjective universe and our practices in day-to-day realities. See *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1998.

⁶³ As a favourite example of Bateson's ability to analyze the layers of communicative interaction (that is, representation of self and intention) he says this about play-fighting between dogs: "the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite". Gregory Bateson. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. (1972/2000). 180

⁶⁴ Gregory Bateson "Form, Substance and Difference" in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. 1972.

⁶⁵ Thomas Kuhn. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1962/1970. 102.

Holland's work on what she calls 'figured worlds'. Two individuals occupying the same physical space are shown to be operating in two very different worlds depending on the imaginative frameworks that structure and code both the space around them and their place within it.⁶⁶ So from the epistemic paradigms of historical epics to the belief systems of everyday individuals, how we imagine the world is a fundamental act determining the world we ultimately occupy and how we act within it.

What this implies for attempts to connect art with sustainability, is that we might do well to acknowledge this mediating influence of paradigms, figured worlds, imaginative frameworks, worldviews, etc. and insert something of a 'middle bracket' between 'art' and 'issue'. In other words, rather than taking a given issue and seeking its immediate translation directly into the aesthetic, i.e. songs about logging, climate change improv, etc., we might first try and understand the paradigmatic, subjective, imaginative terrain surrounding that issue, or in Holland's terms, identify the figured world. What are the conceptual outlooks, imaginative resources, habits of mind, that come to bear on that issue? What is the larger sense of world and self at play in this present concern?

I feel that this approach will garner more enthusiastic interactions from artists and evolve more promising aesthetic languages. Not to be black and white or bullying about the matter, but this is because I believe the underlying difference between this approach and infocentric approaches, is the difference between inviting artists to create art, and inviting them to produce tools. Locating the relevant imaginative, subjective terrain may clear much more idiomatic ground for artistic engagement and reveal much more potent leverage points for change, even if it frustrates hopes for quick 'behavioural outcomes' all the same. This in itself may cause a snowballing effect and yield a much more significant idiom, not just for how artists might engage with sustainability, but how we think of sustainability in general, what sort of a problem we consider it to be, and what sort of interactions are welcome and relevant to our relationships with it.

What might one possible solution be for that 'middle bracket'? What of the subjective, imaginative dimensions common to Western, rational, industrial societies might be relevant to our typically dysfunctional relationship with our environments? Environmental philosopher Andrew Light makes a useful distinction in the literature on environmental thought, dividing what he calls 'environmental materialism' from 'environmental ontology'.⁶⁷ Here materialism identifies political and technological dimensions of sustainability, while ontology identifies these more metaphysical, ontological aspects of the challenge – cognitive, imaginative, conceptual resources we deploy in the defining, mapping and experiencing of our

⁶⁶ Holland, et al. chapter 1, "The Woman Who Climbed up the House" in *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1998.

⁶⁷ Andrew Light, "Marcuse, Ecology and Environmentalism" in *Herbert Marcuse: the critical reader*. John Abromeit and Mark Cobb, eds. Routledge: NY, 2004. 230.

realities. In other words, those whom Light refers to as 'environmental ontologists' are pursuing precisely the aspects of our subjective, imaginative lives that might bear on questions of sustainability. It is diverse company: Martin Heidegger⁶⁸, Timothy Morton⁶⁹, Gregory Bateson⁷⁰, Val Plumwood⁷¹, Freya Matthews⁷², David Abrams⁷³, Deep Ecology⁷⁴ in general and more recently, the work of Bruno Latour.⁷⁵ These are just some of the thinkers and movements prioritizing this subjective, imaginative dimension of the environmental crisis, citing fundamental ontological, epistemological and metaphysical assumptions common in Western industrialized contexts.

1.3.5 Bruno Latour and the Modern Constitution

1.3.5.1 The dichotomies of Modernity and their relevance to sustainability

Interestingly enough, despite such a diversity of positions, each of these 'ontology' arguments contains a variation on a central theme, what Latour calls "the Modern Constitution", what Alfred North Whitehead calls "the bifurcation of nature", what is variously known as Cartesian dualism, subject-object dualism, fact/value divides, etc. The basic content here is that the world of fact and the world of value, the world of the object and that of the subject, are discrete domains. A central tenet of Modernity, the crux of imagining the world within a 'Westernized' idiom, is in keeping them so. I, as subject, am removed from the world as object, set apart. The Earth and all its non-human mechanisms and occupants conduct their affairs according to unchanging mechanical laws, without consciousness or intention, while humans wash around in the mutable world of value, opinion, and experience, and these domains do not overlap—our 'reality' within our heads has no bearing on *real* reality, out there in the world. Furthermore, knowledge of the world 'as it really is', objective and absolute, involves actively seeking methodologies that neutralize the subjective content of our engagement with the world. Somehow, wanting to know what the world is really like, for a Modern, Western citizen, meant wanting to know what it is like when you are not there to know that it is like that.

Bruno Latour goes so far as to locate this orientation of fact-value, subject-object dualism so centrally within Western thought that he refers to it as the "Modern Constitution", that is, the constituting framework by which modernism came to be. Such a framework connects to dysfunctional relationships with natural

⁶⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hopfstadter, trans. New York: Harper & Row, 1975

⁶⁹ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007.

⁷⁰ Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity (Advances in Systems Theory, Complexity, and the Human Sciences)*. Bantam Books, 1979.

⁷¹ Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: the Ecological Crisis of Reason*. Routledge, 2002.

⁷² Freya Matthews, *The Ecological Self*. London: Routledge. 1991. and *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture*. Sydney: UNSW Press. 2005

⁷³ David Abram. 1996. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.

⁷⁴ Roger Sessions. *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*. Boston: Shambala, 1995.

⁷⁵ Bruno Latour. *The Politics of Nature*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2004.; Bruno Latour "On actor-network theory: A few clarifications plus more than a few complications" available online at: www.cours.fse.ulaval.ca/edc-65804/latour-clarifications.pdf. Accessed on November 1, 2010; Bruno Latour. "What is the Style of Matters of Concern?" Spinoza Lecture available at <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/articles/article/97-STYLE-MATTERS-CONCERN.pdf>. 2008; Bruno Latour. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1993

environments in several important ways.⁷⁶ First, once we, as modern rational citizens, are thoroughly convinced of the ontological priority of objectivity—the account of the world absent of subjective content—we find ourselves in an incoherent position. Our experience of the world is obviously fundamental to how we understand our existence. Yet if we are asked to subvert that experience to larger truths which we cannot experience, we are perhaps more vulnerable to a sense of meaninglessness as it pertains to being in the world. We are compelled to live either in the truth of facts we cannot experience, or in the experience of values we cannot trust.⁷⁷ In this, the rational subject grows “infinitely remote from the world.”⁷⁸ We become irrelevant to our realities, provoking a sense of detachment, disenchantment, alienation, perhaps even futility at the mute role offered the demoted element of human experience. How then, might we be moved to respect and protect the natural world with which we are only peripherally involved?

Historian Richard Tarnas angles this point in a more psychological, spiritual direction:

The underlying anxiety and disorientation that pervade modern societies in the face of a meaningless cosmos create both a collective psychic numbness and a desperate spiritual hunger, leading to an addictive craving for ever more material goods to fill the inner emptiness and producing a manic techno-consumerism that cannibalizes the planet. Highly practical consequences ensue from the disenchanted modern worldview.⁷⁹

So not only does a detached, disenchanted psychic orientation leave us uninspired towards a spirit of planetary stewardship, for Tarnas, it lies at the root of what drives planetary destruction through over-consumptive materialism.

1.3.5.2 Map/territory: the collapse of the Modern Constitution

But there is perhaps an even more fundamental issue. Beyond whatever psychological consequences objective accounts of absolute reality may have for our subjective engagement with our worlds, there is the question of whether we have managed to separate subject and object sufficiently to provide ourselves with an absolute account of reality in the first place? Drawing on his field of Science Studies, Latour joins a large number of scholars from a variety of disciplines who emphatically reject the suggestion that we have. Such a separation, Latour has gone to pains to point out, fails to hold up even in the antiseptic environment of our scientific

⁷⁶ Latour, 1993. 34, 41, 42, 51.

⁷⁷ Latour, 2008. 12.

⁷⁸ Latour, 1993. 56.

⁷⁹ Richard Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche – Intimations of a New World-View*. Toronto: Penguin: Plume, 2006. 32.

laboratories.⁸⁰ This collapse of subject-object dualism as the modernist methodological framework is precipitated by, in Latour's argument, a series of interconnected breaches.

The first of these pertains to the inevitability of subjectivity in human endeavours. The rich literatures of Science Studies and the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge have demonstrated the inability for human practices to eliminate subjectivity. It seems we cannot describe the world from nowhere, as objectivity desires. As Kuhn pointed out, facts remain artifacts of paradigms. Objective truths are appendages to larger paradigms of value, belief, and other subjective predispositions. We see the world in terms of what we believe, how we imagine, and the languages at our disposal. Latour goes even further, arguing that the objective world is thoroughly subjective not only for its dependence on meaning, imagination, language and perception, but also politics, that we cannot help but 'make choices' about 'facts' based on political or economic necessity as well.⁸¹

In this, the unwanted involvement of the subject tarnishes the desire of objectivity. But the object is not innocent either, betraying its objectifications in two ways, one, in proving more complex than our descriptive engagements might wish, and two, in proving more dynamic. From a complexity point of view, ecologist Frank Egler's famous statement is apt: "Nature is not only more complex than we think, but it is more complex than we *can* think."⁸² Our inability to map a natural system sufficient to predict and manage its behaviour is something of an *idée fixe* of sustainability.⁸³

Michel Callon gives a compelling example of this in his classic paper, "Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay".⁸⁴ Here an entire fishery policy is established around the scientifically-proven 'fact' that a particular species of scallop larvae will attach to liner nets of a specific material. Once policy is rolled out and heavy investment is made based on this objectification of the object, "the scallops became dissidents," as Callon puts it, when the "the larvae which complied [with the earlier fact of attachment] are betrayed by those they were thought to represent."⁸⁵ In other words, this is one of countless examples where an isolated view of a particular sample of a natural system gave rise to a particular account that was taken to be universal and absolute. Policy forms around the results of the particular account, assuming it would hold true in all cases at all times, only to be disappointed

⁸⁰ Latour, 1999. *Pandora's Hope*. Harvard University Press. 9-10.; Latour, 1993. 50.

⁸¹ Latour, 2004. *The Politics of Nature*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 147.

⁸² Quoted in Roger Sessions "The Deep Ecology Movement: A Review" *Environmental Review: ER*, Vol. 11, No. 2. Summer, 1987. P. 114.

⁸³ Mike Hulme. *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction, and Opportunity*. Cambridge University Press. 2009. 83.

⁸⁴ Michel Callon. "Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay." In *The Science Studies Reader*. Biagioli, Mario. Routledge: New York, 1999. 67.

⁸⁵ Callon. 79.

by the inadequacy of the account. So one important way in which the object evades objectification is to prove more complex than its representation. Here representation is inert yet inadequate.

An object's more perplexing betrayal of its objectifications is through a dynamism, where representation has an unintended agency, turning the object into a dynamic discussant. In other words, through giving an object a particular representation and then relating to it as such, the object responds to that relationship, changing in defiance of our initial representation. This is another central theme of sustainability challenges, one familiar to the risk literature and the work of scholars like Sheila Jasanoff: "Scientific and technical advances bring unquestioned benefits, but they also *generate* new uncertainties and failures, with the result that doubt continually undermines knowledge, and unforeseen consequences confound faith in progress"⁸⁶ (my italics). Climate instability and antibiotic-resistant microbes are two notorious examples.

The promise of subject-object dualism invites us to engage with natural objects and natural systems as machinery, machinery with which we can tinker without consequence. We can take apart a car, examine its parts, lay them out in different orders, study them, photograph them, replace them, and so long as we reassemble them we will have the same car. It will not have changed. It is an object. But this is not true of organisms or ecosystems, living systems that have an agency of their own, and that develop and respond to environmental pressures that *include* human investigations into their properties. These are not objects, they do not stay put, safely on the other side of subject-object divisions. They will negotiate with our interventions no matter what our metaphysics say. Failing to recognize this yields a massive proliferation in what Latour calls 'hybrids.'

Very simply, a hybrid is a mixture, an object whose genealogy incorporates both natural and cultural agencies.⁸⁷ Within the Modern Constitution it is chimera, a myth, a monster. It should not exist. If the separation of the subjective from the objective was successful, then the subject has no role in producing the object, it merely comes to know it. However, rather than the subject studying its object across the divide of the Modern Constitution, Latour's field of Science Studies has done well in the past thirty years to demonstrate how mediations in the form of scientific interventions into the natural world mix cultural agencies with natural ones to produce hybrids. This all slipped below the ontological radar of the Modern Constitution because of what Latour calls 'purification': that which "renders the work of mediation ... invisible, unthinkable, unrepresentable." Purification consistently classified these hybrids back into the domain of the natural objects. In other words, it denied their status as subjects and ignored their capacity to negotiate, interact, or evolve in response to our interventions.

⁸⁶ Jasanoff, S. (2003) 'Technologies of Humility: Citizen Participation in Governing Science. *Minerva*, 41. 224.

⁸⁷ Latour, 1993. 50.

In an important sense the Modern Constitution has been cheating; shifty accounting has kept its handiwork ‘off the books’ allowing “the expanded proliferation of the hybrids whose existence, whose very possibility, it denies.”⁸⁸ That denial, however, is getting harder to pull off. Pounding on the doors of the Modern Constitution are the ever-increasing ‘hybrids’ of the sustainability crisis, collapsing fish stocks, polluted water systems, deforestation and soil erosion, a changing climate – all are Latourian hybrids, bastards born of the denied parentage of natural and cultural interactions.

1.3.5.3 Sustainability as a metaphysical problem: the failings of the IPCC

The sustainability controversy that illustrates this perhaps more directly than any others, is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The support for, and justification of, the IPCC was arguably dependent on the promise of scientific objectivity, on being able to deal with ‘the climate’ as a purified, natural object, not some Latourian hybrid.⁸⁹ Yet given the enormous complexity of the climate system, along with the inextricable political dimensions to the very idea of anthropogenic climate change, establishing the authoritative voice of scientific absolutism was untenable. As John Robinson and Allison Shaw point out in their 2004 discussion of IPCC practices, the mechanism of “truth speaks to power” familiar to the science-policy relationship was unavailable given extensive normative dimensions to the matter at hand (unequal levels of industrial development, necessary levels of caution, anticipated distribution of harms, etc.).⁹⁰ Thus the bare functionality of the IPCC required a rigorous engagement with diverse value-based perspectives.⁹¹

To meet this requirement, “the IPCC has developed several innovative approaches to the science-policy interface... intended to facilitate interaction between science and policy communities and thus contribute to situating the IPCC scientific assessment process within an intergovernmental framework.”⁹² In an appendix to their work, Shaw and Robinson describe this interaction:

This practice involves judgments about who is included in the assessment process, what information is considered acceptable and adequate for review, the negotiation of an appropriate interpretation among participating scientists, and the method for disclosing this interpretation to a policy audience. Judgments are made among a core group of climate scientists yet extend beyond the strict boundaries of scientific inquiry. Assessments have time-dependent and value-dependent aspects that force

⁸⁸ Latour, 1993. 34.

⁸⁹ John Robinson, personal communication

⁹⁰ Alison Shaw and John Robinson. 2004. “Relevant but not Prescriptive? Science Policy Models within the IPCC” in *Philosophy Today*, Supplement. 85.

⁹¹ John Robinson, personal communication. See also Sheila Jasanoff: “Studies of scientific advisors leave in tatters the notion that it is possible, in practice, to restrict the advisory process to technical issues or that the subjective values of scientists are irrelevant to decision making.” Sheila Jasanoff. *The Fifth Branch*. Harvard University Press. 1990. 230.

⁹² Shaw and Robinson. 2004. 84

scientists to make tacit assumptions about the needs of the “user” audience (i.e., policymakers) as they contemplate and/or anticipate the ways information will be used in the non-scientific sphere and the subsequent social and political implications of the information derived. Mandated science is thus “a hybrid activity in which scientific expertise is accompanied by a considerable amount of social and political judgment” (Farrell et al., 2001).⁹³

A painstaking interaction between scientists and policymakers features things like gruelling weeks of meetings that begin at 8 a.m. and extend well past midnight, emergency gatherings to address hotly contested passages of text, and an iterative process of negotiation and revision requiring every official IPCC document be addressed “by *all* participating governments and consensually approved through a line-by-line process...What is constructed and produced by this process is a hybrid document that is intended to be both scientifically credible and politically approved or authorized.”⁹⁴

From a Latourian perspective this is heartening. Here we have an extremely rigorous example of engaging the objects of environmental concern as hybrid, where “scientific and political communities can operate together to produce information that remains credible to both communities.”⁹⁵ However, if the IPCC had hoped to publish this ‘mandated science’ to a grateful audience, pleased to see an environmental hazard finally confronted in all its natural and social complexities, a bonafide Latourian hybrid, they would be disappointed. The IPCC process “sparked significant controversy and criticism with regard to the credibility of IPCC interpretations and products,”⁹⁶ and “the science involved in the IPCC assessments has been criticized for weaknesses in methodological rigor and integrity in scientific interpretation.”⁹⁷

How ought we respond to such controversy? Renew our attempt at business as usual? Acquiesce to the criticism and return to a strict natural sciences approach to the climate? Ignore the entire wave of post-modern scholarship, Science Studies, Sociology of Scientific Knowledge, etc. and start dealing with the climate as a good old-fashioned fact? But of course it is sustainability’s objects themselves that make this route impossible. By science’s own findings, climates and fish populations cannot be dealt with effectively as matters of fact any longer. Sustainability is the breakdown of this intellectual framework. Therefore it strikes me that such an approach is untenable. Retreating from the comingling of the scientific and political

⁹³ Shaw and Robinson. 2004. 92

⁹⁴ Shaw and Robinson. 2004. 94

⁹⁵ Shaw and Robinson. 2004. 85

⁹⁶ Shaw and Robinson. 2004. 84

⁹⁷ Shaw and Robinson. 2004. 85

dimensions of sustainability is surely not an option.⁹⁸ Rather, it would seem there is no choice but to simply get better at doing it.

This, however, may be in vain if the larger audience for such work does not emerge from its modernist cave. Regardless of how well the IPCC integrates scientific rigor with political necessity, it remains a metaphysical vagabond. What is missing is a larger conceptual paradigm in which these realms, facts and values, are understood as irrevocably (and historically) intertwined. Until we arrive at such a paradigm, where a hybridity of values and facts is idiomatic to our view of the world, politics will always look like the flea-bitten pragmatism of human realities, and science will go on shouldering unrealistic expectations of absolutism. The IPCC is perhaps less a failure of science or politics, and more of ontology. A failure of the fundamental instincts underlying our imagining of the world.

I see in this example a fundamental disconnect between our current relationship with the world and our basic conceptions of what sort of a thing that world is. The strain of navigating new worlds with old metaphysics. These new worlds are characterized by what Paul Crutzen has titled ‘the Anthropocene’, indicating that the influence of human actions on the Earth is significant enough to constitute a new geological era.⁹⁹ This is a diagnosis of hybridity at a global level. If we referred to ourselves as ‘world-makers’ in the past, the conversation likely concerned semiotics and the making of worlds at conceptual, imaginative levels—the discussion of Heidegger, Bateson or Holland above. Now, however, this semiotic agency is increasingly interwoven with a material agency where making our worlds is no longer a ‘merely semiotic’, but reaches deep into the physical structures of our realities as well.

1.3.5.4 Transcendence vs. Immanence

What I find in the IPCC example (and much other sustainability work) is that despite this very new relationship with planetary systems, where we are having to tackle problems resulting from greatly amplified human agencies, where we are, in *practice*, having to confront the world as hybrid, we are, in theory, still considering it a transcendent object, something whose properties exist independent of human action and conception and can be identified objectively, in absolute terms. We must, I suggest, learn to trade a ‘metaphysics of transcendence’ for a ‘metaphysics of immanence’ in order to make sense of ourselves and a world that is now, more than ever, in our own hands.

⁹⁸ Climate scientist Mike Hulme makes this point emphatically in “Why We Disagree About Climate Change”, something we will turn to at length in the concluding discussion.

⁹⁹ Paul Crutzen. “Geology of Mankind. *Nature*, vol 415. January, 2002. Available online at <http://nature.berkeley.edu/classes/espm-121/anthropocene.pdf>

I use these age-old antonyms with caution as there are so many permutations of the distinction between transcendent and immanent agencies in human affairs. I hope to cobble together some coherent picture of what I intend with their use by layering the philosophical ideas of Richard Rorty with the more empirically-driven (though no less philosophically conscientious) arguments of Latour.

In “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” (2007), Richard Rorty begins with a familiar thesis. Long accustomed to seeking its redemption through religion, the transition of the Western world into the modern age was a shift from ‘God’ to ‘Truth’.¹⁰⁰ Rorty largely conflates the role of philosopher and scientist in this notion of truth, a view perhaps idiomatic to the practices of the early Enlightenment, as he marks their separate trajectories by the 19th century with the collapse of German idealism and the continued rise of science’s materialist metaphysics.¹⁰¹ For our purposes, we can be blunt enough to see this as the transition from the sacred to the secular, spirit to reason. Where once it was the properties of heaven that corralled value in the public imagination, modernism swapped in the properties of Earth and the supremacy of natural laws.

A similar history is told with greater detail and differing emphasis by Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self*; Richard Tarnas in *The Passion of the Western Mind*; and Bruno Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern*, (amongst many others). The point to be made here, however, is not to identify how much things changed in this historical moment, but how much they stayed the same. This is not to ignore many fundamental differences between the age of religion and the age of reason, but to identify a crucial commonality. Both systems hold a metaphysical orientation towards the transcendent: the idea that there is a single truth transcending the infinite variety of human values. The task of humanity is to identify that truth and use it to set things straight in the world of human affairs.

The premise of philosophy is that there is a way things really are—a way humanity and the rest of the universe are and always will be, independent of any merely contingent human needs and interests.

Knowledge of this way is redemptive. It can therefore replace religion. The striving for Truth can take the place of the search for God.¹⁰²

Despite the massive overhaul of secularism, there remained entrenched “the power of a being that is what it is apart from any such [human] needs. God and Truth are, respectively, the religious and the philosophical names for that sort of being.”¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Richard Rorty. “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre, in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. Philosophical Papers, Vol. 4. 2007. 4.

¹⁰¹ Rorty, 2007. 14.

¹⁰² Rorty, 2007. 11.

¹⁰³ Rorty, 2007.8.

What we seek from that sort of being is what Rorty calls redemptive truth. “A set of beliefs that would end, once and for all, the process of reflection on what to do with ourselves.”¹⁰⁴ Redemptive truth “is the reality behind the appearance, the one true description of what is going on, the final secret.”¹⁰⁵ There is a whole separate and extensive exploration as to why redemptive truths hold such grip over human imagination. A cynical view might suggest that the power such secrecy grants those who control redemptive truth may be enough to explain their structure. Such a Marxist line feels necessary but insufficient. The more intriguing element that would warrant deeper investigation surely speaks to what it is like to think and feel with and without the benefits of redemptive truth.

A hint of this might be found in wondering at Rorty’s label, redemptive truth. Why redemptive? Could it be that the term is an attempt to capture a relationship with truth that is both *free* and *freeing*? Redemptive truth is free in the sense that it *costs nothing*. It requires no efforts of animation in the form of belief or action. We do not have to ‘pay for it’. It is true whether we care to participate in its veracity or not. More obviously, as Rorty points out, redemptive truth is freeing in that we need no longer wonder how to live, it lays to rest the big existential puzzles, the meta-work of being alive, and simplifies things into a more-or-less coherent structure of virtues.¹⁰⁶

By this account, it is perhaps little wonder that we would be reluctant to give up redemptive truth for some other species of truth that we simultaneously have to pay for, while at the same time constantly question its worth! Only under some form of extreme duress would the human consider such an exchange. For this reason Rorty suggests that we have now arrived at “not just a new stage in the history of philosophy, but a new self-image for humanity.”¹⁰⁷ What is presently taking place, in other words, is remarkably different than anything that has come before.

With the collapse of German Idealism in the 19th century, says Rorty, “the intellectuals have been losing faith in philosophy. This amounts to losing faith in the idea that redemption can come from true beliefs.”¹⁰⁸ And with this, according to Rorty, a third stage in our metaphysical outlook begins to emerge, from the hope of redemption “first from God, then from philosophy, and now from literature.”¹⁰⁹ Such a move engenders a culture that has “substituted literature for both religion and philosophy [finding] redemption neither in a

¹⁰⁴ Rorty, 2007. 7.

¹⁰⁵ Rorty, 2007. 7

¹⁰⁶ John Robinson has pushed back against this characterization pointing out that redemptive truth is also the opposite of ‘freeing’ in that it confines imagination and behaviour along its parameters. Certainly this is equally the case, but relative to the qualities of truth that a mode of analysis like STS is trying to put forward, i.e. those with a cost that we can discover by ‘following the actors’, realizing the expensive chains of reference that go into manufacturing such truths, it is the denial of the chains, the denial of these costs, that is to say, the sense of such truth as ‘free’, that is useful to characterize Rorty’s notion of redemptive truth.

¹⁰⁷ Rorty, 2007.4

¹⁰⁸ Rorty, 2007. 9

¹⁰⁹ Rorty, 2007.8

noncognitive relation to a nonhuman person nor in a cognitive relation to propositions [both transcendent impulses], *but in noncognitive relations to other human beings*, relations mediated by human artifacts such as books and buildings, paintings and songs [my italics].”¹¹⁰ We are, in effect, turning inwards to find our truths, away from absolute gods and propositions and towards ourselves, “an intellectual world in which human beings are responsible only to each other.”¹¹¹

This is the move from the transcendent to the immanent. “[Literary] culture drops a presupposition common to religion and philosophy—that redemption must come from one’s relation to something that is not just one more human creation.” In the literary age, we write our own redemptive truths, and more importantly, we sign them. Truth shifts from a descriptive act to a creative one. Where truth once lay in the divine, then in nature, now it lies in the pluralistic, partial, and temporary realm of human expression. And with this, the idea of redemptive truth—that which ceases further asking—perishes.¹¹²

The literary age is one “in which human beings are responsible only to each other”¹¹³ It is one in which we are explicit about the fact that we are making this up as we go, that we cannot expect to unearth a description of heaven, earth, or humanity that will silence further inquiry into our larger purposes.

On the account I am offering, however, this change is an advance. It represents a desirable replacement of bad questions like “what is Being?” “What is really real?” and “what is man?” with the sensible question “does anybody have any new ideas about what we human beings might manage to make of ourselves?”¹¹⁴

Thus the name ‘literary culture’ seems apt, both for necessary creativity and fluidity it evokes. “Literature began to set itself as a rival to philosophy when people like Cervantes and Shakespeare began to suspect that human beings were and ought to be, so diverse that there is no point in pretending that they all carry a single truth deep in their bosoms.”¹¹⁵ According to Rorty, that first glimpse of the post-redemptive age was an artistic revelation, not a religious or philosophical one (although he is careful to count Nietzsche, James, Wittgenstein, Derrida, Heidegger, and Dewey as essential allies in this regard).¹¹⁶ Nonetheless, it is the arts that are perhaps most at home in immanent worlds.

¹¹⁰ Rorty, 2007.10

¹¹¹ Rorty, 2007. 4.

¹¹² The obvious footnote here is to say it was ever thus, that redemptive truths of the past perish and are replaced precisely because truth was never redemptive. The challenge now is to relate to non-redemptive truths non-redemptively rather than dressing up the next candidate in an emperor’s clothing.

¹¹³ Rorty, 2007.4.

¹¹⁴ Rorty, 2007.9

¹¹⁵ Rorty, 2007.11.

¹¹⁶ Rorty, 2007. 4.

However, while Rorty establishes the decline of redemptive truth via philosophy in the mid-19th century, he concedes the persistence of the idea via materialist metaphysics, that is to say, the natural sciences (or in Latourian terms, the Modern Constitution). “Materialist metaphysics, however, is still with us. It is, in fact, pretty much the only version of redemptive truth presently on offer. It is philosophy’s last hurrah, its last attempt to provide redemptive truth and thereby avoid being demoted to the status of a literary genre.”¹¹⁷ So while redemptive truth via philosophy died on its own sword, redemptive truth via materialist metaphysics is proving a much heartier adversary.

Rorty’s olive branch to materialist metaphysics offers science an esteemed position within literary culture as an elegant and effective problem solver. “Modern science is a gloriously imaginative way of describing things, brilliantly successful for the purpose for which it was developed—namely, predicting and controlling phenomena. But it should not pretend to have the sort of redemptive power claimed by its defeated rival, idealist metaphysics.”¹¹⁸ Relinquishing aspirations to redemptive truth “would mean acknowledging both the ability of scientists to add bricks to the edifice of knowledge and the practical utility of scientific theories for prediction while insisting on the irrelevance of both achievements to searches for redemption.”¹¹⁹ Science aids us to our purposes, but does not dictate what those purposes should be.

Thus, as is probably apparent by now, this argument has begun to chase its tail. As the example of the IPCC revealed, equating science with redemptive truth in accordance with a materialist metaphysics is a tenacious instinct. As optimistic as Rorty is about the dawning of the literary age, materialist metaphysics and its faithful do not appear willing participants in its demotion to the status of literary genre.

1.3.5.5 Adding the imaginary to the Modern; Adding the material to the post-modern

Few people are as well acquainted with this as Bruno Latour. What Latour and his many colleagues in the field of Science and Technology Studies have spent the past several decades pointing out, is that within materialist metaphysics, the transcendent we assume is being *discovered* is, in crucial ways, the immanent we are busy *creating*. Redemptive truth in the form of scientific facts, is not revelation, but rather a dense network of human and non-human agents all entangled in a particular creative, descriptive enterprise. This exposes a crucial difference between the immanence of Rorty’s literary culture, and the immanence of Latour’s non-modern world. Rorty’s focus is a human immanence, the capacity and responsibility of humans to establish and proceed towards their highest purposes. It does well to describe (and perhaps prescribe) a broad,

¹¹⁷ Rorty, 2007. 14.

¹¹⁸ Rorty, 2007. 20.

¹¹⁹ Rorty, 2007. 18.

sweeping shift in human consciousness, but may be too philosophical to tackle the political and methodological structures that entrench materialist metaphysics and uphold the idea of redemptive truth in its last, long gasp.

In developing 'Actor Network Theory', Latour, along with Michel Callon and others, sought a method of describing the immanent world that endeavours to include human and non-human purposes in its analysis and in so doing, relieve the natural sciences of their materialist (transcendent) metaphysics and shed its claims to redemptive truth (to explain Latour using Rortian language). This approach creates a 'democracy of actors' by 'flattening' ontology through establishing a single criterion for existence, *the capacity to enter relationships*. "Instead of an objective nature filled with genuine realities and a subjective cultural sphere filled with fabricated fictions, there is a single plane of actors that encompasses neutrons, stars, palm trees, rivers, cats, armies, nations, superheroes, unicorns, and square circles. All objects are treated in the same way."¹²⁰ This "same treatment" determines the existence of a thing solely from its alliances within a network, "an object is no more than what it modifies, transforms, perturbs or creates."¹²¹

The obvious concern here is whether the attempt to democratize ontology spurs runaway relativism. Latour specialist Graham Harman asks, "if Hamlet, Popeye and bald Kings of France are just as real as paraffin, then we seem to be in the land of anything goes?"¹²² Crucially, Latour's democracy is not egalitarian. So while all objects that are able to enter relationships are equally real, they are not equally powerful. "What makes an atom more real than a ghost ... is that it has more allies, *including allies stretching well beyond the human realm...* by contrast, the ghost has only a paltry number of allies bearing witness to its reality, such as hysterical children, and a few old legends"¹²³ (my italics). The atom, by most accounts, has effects on other non-human actors, along with human imaginations, institutions, etc., whereas the ghost, again by most accounts, exists only in our imaginations. Both are real, yet one's reality is more vulnerable as it can form fewer relationships within a network. "Fictional characters and myths have weaker legions of allies testifying to their existence than do lumps of coal. Hence we can democratize the world of actors and still avoid the free-for-all of social construction."¹²⁴

For me, the crucial difference between an Actor-Network immanent reality, and what we might think of as a typical post-modernist immanent reality where 'thinking (or language) makes it so' is the inclusion of the non-human in the larger patterning of relationships, and therefore the larger structure of reality. It allows us to

¹²⁰ Graham Harman, 2009. *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*. Melbourne: Re.Press. 131.

¹²¹ Harman, 2009. 127.

¹²² Harman, 2009. 110.

¹²³ Harman, 2009. 110.

¹²⁴ Harman, 2009. 131.

include all the things that thinking does make so, thus granting essential inclusion of the imaginary, but does not cheapen the imaginary by asserting that that's all there is anyway. At the same time, it requires us to recognize the agency of vast chains of non-human actors, animate and inanimate, that exist on that same plane of reality.

For Latour all reality is political, not because human power inexorably shapes truth, but because truth and reality are assembled through chains of actors in the same way that bills go through Congress. Slightly transformed and translated at each step and failing as often as they succeed. All reality is political, not all politics is human.¹²⁵

An artist trying to find his inner environmentalist could hope for no better, as such a metaphysical structure establishes ground for the imaginative *and* the non-human, entities that have at once seemed traditionally opposed and yet simultaneously deposited within Modernity's strange brand of objectivity.

This analytical strategy makes a compelling argument for understanding the world in immanent terms. Here we are invited to slowly, deliberately map out the ways in which the human, non-human, inanimate, speculative, and virtual all enter into causal relationships, form networks and produce phenomena.

What sort of world is it that obliges us to take into account, at the same time and in the same breath, the nature of things, technologies, sciences, fictional beings, religions large and small, politics, jurisdictions, economics, and unconsciousnesses? Our own, of course. That world ceased being modern when we replaced all essences with the mediators, delegates and translators that gave them meaning.¹²⁶

Replacing the stable essences of our assumed realities with the particular, active agencies that produce and hold them together requires tracing "the painful and costly longhand of its associations."¹²⁷ In an immanent world we are told to follow the actors themselves, "no matter what metaphysical imbroglios they lead us into."¹²⁸

This is why I think it is not self-indulgent but rather essential to understand the IPCC kaffuffle described above (along with other sustainability dilemmas) as a 'metaphysical imbroglio', a philosophical problem, a crisis of ontology. If we don't then we face a very unpromising choice. We can see it as the continuation of

¹²⁵ Harman, 2009. 89.

¹²⁶ Latour, 1993. 129.

¹²⁷ Latour, 2005. 11.

¹²⁸ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2005. 62.

political strife, and continue to try and hammer our way to a solution through the standard measures of political action (meetings, protests, legislation, etc.). Or we can see it as the continuation of an epistemological quandary and hope to solve the climate problem through an absolute description of its objective properties that, we hope, will turn out to be *more* absolute than the absolute description we had, which, unfortunately, turned out not to be so absolute after all.

1.3.5.6 A worldview in our hands?

Once again, are we not right back where we started, with compelling philosophical and empirical arguments for some ‘metaphysics of immanence’—arguments hastened by the rising tide of sustainability challenges that are demanding such a transition—and yet, we remain as we were? We know what the Modern Constitution is, where it comes from, and how it relates to sustainability, yet we are left with the question of what to do about it.

I’m never sure how to characterize Latour’s position on this. During his recent visit to Vancouver others and myself asked various versions of the question of how to make the link between theory and practice in his work. It was informative to me to see that in various different sessions it was precisely this issue that kept coming up. In all cases, Latour was reticent in his responses. And while both *Politics of Nature* (2004) and *Reassembling the Social* (2005) offer concrete approaches for building the good common world out of reach of the Modern Constitution something seems missing from this prescription, perhaps even for Latour himself. Both texts reveal a certain dismay at how deeply entrenched our metaphysical instincts are and the slim chance of change on this crucial front. In *Reassembling the Social* he describes the entrenched modernist instinct as “a Pavlov reflex, a knee-jerk reaction” and goes on to say:

There is no way to fight this prejudice directly since it has been, for more than two centuries, the default position of our operational systems...it is just this default position that makes it impossible to deploy any relativist sociology.¹²⁹

Politics of Nature reveals a similar frustration:

The word negotiation still retains a pejorative sense, because one measures the deals negotiators make by the yardstick of an ideal situation that of course has all the advantages – except that it does not exist! As long as we think we are chipping away from the inside at a fixed sum of positions through a series of compromises, over all the arrangements floats the shadow of a transcendence that would escape all

¹²⁹ Latour. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford University Press. 2005. 183

compromise.¹³⁰

Both remarks allude to the durable persistence of the Modern Constitution as the framework conditioning contemporary imaginings of self and world.

Whether this subjugation is that of emergent collectives to a looming ‘society’ (as found in *Reassembling the Social*) or of human experience to scientific fact (as in *Politics of Nature*, *We Have Never Been Modern* and countless articles), in both cases Latour’s frustration is with the modernist instinct to hold realities explicitly created for ourselves by ourselves (i.e. immanent) as ‘less real’ than those produced and described by methodologies that supposedly eschew human subjectivities. Is it fair to suggest that such remarks reveal a shortcoming in Latour’s approach? Certainly his frustration illustrates that however compelling a vision of a ‘post-Modern Constitution’ world may be, getting there from here is not going to be easy.

Latour’s blueprints for action lie, perhaps appropriately enough, at the level of the collective. Yet his dismay at our prospects of ever accepting such approaches or their outcomes surely lies to some extent with individual outlooks and agency? What may be absent in his scholarship is a more direct engagement with individual experience, a little faith in phenomenology, perhaps? My feeling is that if we are to shift such broad, nebulous idioms of understanding we need to get closer to the ground, into the grit of encounter and beneath purely rational engagement.

The present argument might be summarized as follows: Heidegger, Bateson, Kuhn, Holland and others point out that human realities are, to a significant degree, imaginary, suggesting the efforts of much sustainability practice to prove the world real in the form of irrefutable facts may be misguided. Such efforts may not be the best strategy for engaging humans as eager agents of change as it misses the heavy mediation of imaginative frameworks (while simultaneously denying its own). This is not to say that unsustainability is ‘imaginary’ but the converse, that our imaginative framework is unsustainable. Following Latour, what I have called the ‘Modern Constitution’ inclines our view of the world towards a stark division between human and natural systems, cultivating a rationality that overlooks the deepening hybridity of environmental problems. We cling to outdated ontological instincts built on the premise of an absolute, objective view of the world, and in so doing produce environmental risk faster than we manage it.

Thus the urgent need to identify what capacities lie at our disposal to lend some purchase on this tenacious yet elusive aspect of ourselves. Following Marcuse, Dieleman, Heidegger, Scarry, Steiner, Murdoch, Weil, and

¹³⁰ Latour, 2004. 175.

others, I suggest the arts make a good candidate for inviting a level of engagement and experimentation around how we find ourselves in the world, how we structure that experience, narrate it, cultivate it, give it shape along one set of ideas or another. Generally speaking, this is what the arts do well, offer a level of ontological reflexivity. However, at the same time, the structures of subject-object divisions (the concrete particulars of the Modern Constitution) are, as I will argue in a moment, intrinsic to many idioms of Western art practices, making them something of a ‘model of’ as well as ‘model for’ Western ontological instincts.

This contradiction, identifying the arts as a potential source of reflexivity towards Modernism and an emblem of Modernism at the same time, will only grow more pronounced from here. Its presence began with the recent attempt to use both Rorty and Steiner in the same march towards an ‘arts-derived metaphysics of immanence’. Following Rorty, we might assume that it is simply a matter of letting the arts finish what they started. If the heartbeat of an immanent world first awoke through artistic gestures, perhaps it is artistic gestures that can continue nurturing it to life? In many forms, the arts are intrinsically a demonstration of the impossibility of transcending absolutes. They ask that we find our feet in a fluid reality built of its own immediacy, its own immanence. And yet it is not that simple, as I hope to show. For the arts, particularly the Western classical arts, are both willing and able participants in the Modern Constitution.

This contradiction might seem like a rhetorical nuisance, but in fact cuts deep into this investigation. Are the arts of the ‘West’ a reliable agent to their larger cultural context? Or are they a rogue agent, undermining its ideological structures from within? Do they enforce status quo assumptions of self and world or defy them? I have suggested they are a model both of and for Western imaginative frameworks, and I will develop this argument further along. At the same time, the entire premise of this argument follows those who position them as reflexive within such a framework. They are, it would seem, a double agent. This contradictory or outright duplicitous role is important to keep in mind as we move towards a discussion of methods.

Yet there remains another snag. Steiner’s Heideggerian understanding of the arts as revealing that which lies beyond the immediacies of our worlds through his ‘presence of an absence’ starts to sound vaguely transcendent given the recent discussion of Rorty and Latour. Nevertheless, I confess, no other description of the aesthetic encounter resonates as strongly with my own experience. It is the conditions for this kind of aesthetic moment that I am trying to establish within efforts to engender more sustainable worlds. What to make of this? Is this a new transcendence? Am I trying to swap out scientific facts and sneak some sort of ‘art fact’ through the back door? However vague Steiner’s ‘presence of an absence’ might be, its ontological status is deeply relevant to the role of the arts in an immanent world and may help us come to terms with the ontological landscape of immanence more generally. What sort of beings exist there? How do we relate to

them? How do we relate to one another, given the existence of such beings? These are important questions to bookmark for discussion further along.

The hope for now is that this theoretical framework arrives at an essential role of artistic practice in the challenge of sustainability. Not just a way of incorporating art to give it something to do, but identifying a crucial interaction. At the same time, the hope is that this interaction preserves many of the conditions by which artistic practices are at their strongest. Trying to avoid the burden of infocentrism and instrumentalism while preserving some degree of relevance is our concern here. In an effort to take up the growing enthusiasm for humanist dimensions of the sustainability crisis, in particular the increasing focus on the arts, this research embarks on an exploration into the optimal prescriptive circumstances for engaging artistic capacity.

I do not underestimate the challenge of revising one's ontological instincts. As the methods section will make clear, all that is going to be attempted here is to situate a particular metaphysical outlook (the Modern Constitution) in elements of a series of Western art practices (theatre, music, poetry and visual art) and explore the process of moving such practices away from the structuring influence of subject-object dualism. This, I believe, offers a role for art that is both essential to sustainability discussions and compelling to artists themselves as it speaks as much or more to issues of form than content. It will, I hope, clear some faint path towards a broader wondering about sustainability in general while offering more idiomatic and open-ended terrain in which artistic languages may wander. While this might seem theoretically grandiose, I hope it remains practically so as well. If we cannot add a dimension of sustainability that invites our biggest ways of wondering about ourselves and our world, then not only might we be missing out on the crux of the problem, but the fun of it. Art is our culture's means of play and I am eager to see if such playfulness can find its place in the present dilemma.

Chapter 2: Methodology: The Ontological Pursuit

The theoretical argument I am offering as part of this research is an attempt to clear a path between art and sustainability that avoids what may be the counterproductive tasks of either messenger or cheerleader.¹³¹ In so doing, I follow a category of environmental thought Andrew Light refers to as Environmental Ontology, seeing the challenges of sustainability to be more than the concrete particulars of a given issue, but necessarily entailing more abstracted elements of society that pertain to how we conceive of ourselves and our realities, i.e. ontological and metaphysical attributes. This approach allows me to align arguments for sustainability as entailing a metaphysical transformation with estimations of what art ‘does’ that are familiar to Western discourse. In other words, if we read the environmental crisis as a crisis of ontology and we understand art as a cultural source of ontological reflexivity, then the relationship between the two becomes rather obvious.

As discussed at the outset of the previous chapter, I remain concerned that the healthy instinct to include the arts in the challenges of sustainability is not being matched by an equally healthy invitation. Even after a lengthy exploration of concerns relevant to the present prescriptive challenge, there remains the challenge of arriving at a methodology that takes such concerns into consideration. In other words, how do we take the previous descriptive engagement with artistic agency and arrive at some prescriptive strategy? Having argued that successful creative inquiry requires a hefty degree of autonomy—that tightly defined instrumental agendas hamper the condition of responsiveness, learning, inquiry, exploration, so necessary to the aesthetic—this research may have painted itself into a bit of a methodological corner. Can it absorb cautionary tales of an instrumental use of art and still find ways to use it nonetheless? Can it draw some sort of meaningful engagement with the nebulous elements of self, world, worldview, ontology, and metaphysics? And should it manage to do so, how will we know? How to evaluate a project like this? Attempting to resolve these issues constitutes the following discussion of methods.

2.1 Research context: The Greenest City Conversations

The context of this research was the Greenest City Conversations project (GCC). This research project was a joint-collaboration between the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University aimed at exploring the engagement of citizens of the City of Vancouver with sustainability through five different ‘channels’: visualization workshops, table top games, mobile phone applications, social media studies, and arts events.

¹³¹ It remains a concern of mine that what I am proposing may turn out to make an equally counterproductive exchange of relevance for autonomy, something that will be discussed in the concluding sections.

The unifying theme of this project was the challenge to abandon linear, expert-driven ‘broadcasts’ of information on sustainability and move towards interactive, emergent dialogues focused on collective public engagement. This shift was in response to the well-documented shortcomings of much sustainability engagement dedicated to raising people’s awareness through ‘one-way’ transmissions of information.¹³² Rather than devise engagement built around an expert armed with solutions ready-made for a given context, the GCC began with the conviction that sustainability must emerge from within that context. Any ‘truth’ to sustainability is necessarily an emergent phenomenon, constructed through the interaction of different agencies implicated in that truth.

This distinction separates what GCC principal investigator John Robinson identifies as two distinct approaches to sustainability, the substantive, and the procedural.¹³³ Substantive sustainability is targeted, teleological. Experts define the substance of what sustainability is, and the challenge of engagement entails getting the public to live up to it. ‘Procedural sustainability’ abandons efforts to get various publics to ‘face the facts’ of some ‘real world’ in favour of fostering rich engagement with the future as a space of possibility. Therefore it begins with only the loosest sense of what sustainability is for a given context in conjunction with a given issue.¹³⁴ Procedural sustainability is a normative principle, something built out of values, through collective processes: “An emergent property of a discussion about desired futures – a discussion informed by some understanding of the ecological, social and economic consequences of different courses of action.”¹³⁵ Here, the engagement challenge is one of arriving at the substance of sustainability through processes of public engagement.

My argument from within the GCC process is that the challenge of procedural sustainability doesn’t just ask us to think about sustainability differently, it asks us to *think* differently. To our Modernist instincts, truth is not something we arrive at through emergent processes; it isn’t interactive, democratic, value-based, or connected to human systems of meaning. Truth is objective, absolute, something we uncover through the tools and methodologies of scientific practice. In such a reality, human experience is, by official accounts, largely irrelevant. It does not factor into any reliable picture of what the world is actually like. The Modernist instinct is to separate values from facts, subject from object, self from world, the irrelevant experience from the objectively real. To the Modernist mind, the road to sustainability is paved with facts.

¹³² In addition to those cited in the previous chapter, see also: Elizabeth Shove. 2010. “Beyond the ABC: climate change policy and theories of social change.” *Environment and Planning A* 42(6):1273–1285

¹³³ John Robinson. “Squaring the circle? Some thoughts on the idea of sustainable development.” *Ecological Economics*, 48, 2004. 369-384.

¹³⁴ For a detailed discussion of emerging models of procedural sustainability see: Thadeus R. Miller. “Constructing Sustainability science: emerging perspectives and research trajectories.” *Sustainability Science*. July, 2012. Available online at <http://rd.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11625-012-0180-6>

¹³⁵ Roy Bendor, Susanna Haas Lyons, and John Robinson. “What’s There Not To ‘Like’? The Technical Affordances of Sustainability Deliberations on Facebook.” *JeDEM* 4(1). (2012): 71.

To the GCC, however, the road to sustainability is paved with values, and meanings, stories, and other artifacts of our cultural, social, and imaginative lives. The advantages of this direction are three-fold, as identified by Daniel Fiorino in 1989 and subsequently taken up by many others within public engagement work:¹³⁶ *instrumental*, in that collective decisions are easier to implement; *normative*, in that collective decisions acknowledge the rights of citizens to influence decision-making; and *substantive*, in that collective decisions which incorporate a diversity of perspectives are better decisions. Achieving these advantages falls to a handful of overlapping concepts characterizing collective processes of meaning-making: dialogicality, deliberation, emergence and interactivity.

Therefore, the GCC principles, along with their attendant virtues (as characterized by Fiorino and Stirling) and the larger context of procedural sustainability I see as applied aspects of the larger theoretical discussion in the previous chapter. The metaphysical implications of Latour's non-modernism, or Rorty's literary culture in an age where redemptive truth has expired, are entirely consistent with the practical principles of procedural sustainability. The GCC, in other words, can be understood as an endeavour to build sustainability engagement within Latourian, Rortian worlds.

As much as this provides Robinson's procedural commitments an encompassing metaphysical home (theoretically speaking), it also implicates them in the same challenges that arose in the previous discussion of the IPCC: How do we do this? How do we divest ourselves of the instincts toward objective approaches to truth and value? How do we make sense of hybrid realities? How do we return the subject to the world? Once we step into subjective and collective processes of establishing truth and value, whether for instrumental, normative or substantive reasons, how do we do so responsibly and rigorously, and when we do, what happens?

In other words, the move away from Modernist approaches to social change (e.g. information deficit models claiming authority based on the authority of various objective accounts of reality) faces both practical and ontological barriers. Practically speaking, how do we cultivate emergent, interactive approaches and once we do, how do we extend them to various publics? Ontologically speaking, how are the products of such processes met by our larger instincts about truth and value—instincts that are, in all likelihood, dominated by what Rorty referred to earlier as materialist metaphysics, that belief that our galvanizing, organizing principles stem from absolute descriptions of a material reality?

¹³⁶ Daniel Fiorino. "Environmental risk and democratic process: A critical review." *Columbia Journal of Environmental Law* 14. 1989. 501-47. see also: Andrew Stirling. "Analysis, Participation and Power: Justification and Closure in Participatory Multi-Criteria Analysis." *Land Use Policy* 23. (2006): 95-107.

Given the instinct to separate our values from our facts, the practice of collective meaning-making within a Modernist context remains at odds with the encompassing worldview. Our activities fall out of step with our ontologies, what we do runs ahead of how we think. But given that a worldview is, generally speaking, the mechanism with which we build our world, how to escape the recursive relationship between the worlds we build and the worldviews we build them with? This question will strike most approaches to sustainability as unidiomatic, incoherent, or perhaps just not that useful. Yet it is speculative terrain in which many artistic activities—often those unconnected to sustainability—find themselves very much at home.

2.2 The Double Agent

At the end of the previous chapter, we arrived at a contradictory notion of art, one that found in art both subversive and faithful agencies, the capacity to both undermine and support its broader discursive context. Rather than this being a weakening paradox, I would like to suggest it is essential to artistic agency and that the comfort the arts find in the very broad issues of our imaginative relationships to self and world—these metaphysical conversations, our ontological instincts, the stuff of worldviews—rests in this notion of art as a ‘double agent’. The preceding characterization of art focused primarily on its status as rogue agent, traitor in our midst, able to undermine the stability of the context in which it is found. This is the notion of art as a source of ontological reflexivity put forward by Marcuse, Heidegger, Bateson, Dieleman, Rorty, and others, *a tool to rethink the tools with which we think*.

But there is an equally important characterization of art as a trustworthy agent of its context, a faithful representative that both describes and prescribes a sense of identity very much in keeping with the status quo imagining of self and world. In this regard, I suggest modern Western art practice forms a tangible ‘site’ where we might engage the Modern Constitution because this practice is so deeply shaped by it. In other words, the idioms of modern Western art practice are places where we can actually see, hear, feel, and experience our metaphysics in action because they are so heavily conditioned by the ontological and metaphysical instincts rooted in this way of imagining the world.

Defending this suggestion with a comprehensive theory of Western art practices across multiple genres is obviously futile. However, there are a few basic features we can identify with this tradition that align it very closely with precisely those features of modernity we’ve been discussing, in particular a secular notion of redemptive truth. The standard model of art production in a Western practice goes something like this: We begin with the Romantic archetype of creativity, the artist as hero, or as Nicolas Bourriaud and Felix Guattari

describe it “the pure creator relying on crypto-divine inspiration.”¹³⁷ This initiating genius (composer, playwright, etc.) is perceived to be solitary, isolated, removed from society, and largely transcendent of contextual circumstance. Such a characterization was integral to the Romantic myth of artists as it enables the objects they produce (scores, scripts, etc.) to assume their place as transcendent signifier, as object wholly other from the muck of any particular human context.

George Steiner affirms this view, characterizing the creative agent as more conduit than fabricator:

There is, moreover, a genuine sense in which aesthetic acts are accidents, are ‘happenings’, whose primary namelessness is disguised by the hazard of an individual signature. The language of the poem precedes and ‘speaks’ the poet more than it is formed or spoken by him. Numerous are the builders, painters, sculptors of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance known only to us as ‘the Master’ of this or that work. Music often seems to ‘pass through’ (though that again is a rhetorical figure) the person of its composer as it does through that of the performer with a formal necessity and universality far exceeding any individuation.¹³⁸

According to Steiner, this sense of art’s transcendent origins is not limited to the West:

In most cultures, in the witness borne to poetry and art until most recent modernity, the source of ‘otherness’ has been actualized or metaphorized as transcendent. It has been evoked as divine, as magical, as daemonic....That presence is the source of powers, of significations in the text, in the work, neither consciously willed nor consciously understood.¹³⁹

These passages identify several important points to keep in mind. First, the question of what a signature *disguises*. Who or what is being obfuscated in this act? Here we are given further evocation of this ‘presence of an absence’ raised by Steiner earlier on, a sense of artistic creativity being a responsiveness to something beyond the artist’s own creative powers, and instead a response to an agency *transcendent* of his own imagination. Second, the suggestion that art is universally considered transcendent, raises two concerns. First that such an idea may not be exclusive to a Western context and therefore not simply an artifact of the Modern Constitution. Second is Steiner’s argument that “that presence is the source of its powers”. This returns us to the question of the ontological status of Steiner’s ‘presence of an absence’. What kind of transcendence is this? And is the agency that art holds within a Western context inextricable from a

¹³⁷ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, English edition translated by Simon Pleasance and Fionza Woods, France: les presses du réel, 2002. 93.

¹³⁸ George Steiner, *Real Presences*. London: Faber and Faber, 1989. 170.

¹³⁹ Steiner, 1989. 211.

Modernist notion of art as transcendent? If it should shed allegiance to a Modernist metaphysics, does it also shed the power folks like Heidegger, Marcuse, Bateson, Dieleman, and others, ascribe to it? Again, this will be an important issue for the concluding discussion.

For now it is simply worth noting how closely the mythology surrounding art parallels Latour's notion of purification. I argue that art and science form two sides of the same secularization coin that rolled through Europe amidst the Enlightenment. Where Latour's initial notion of purification described the fashioning of transcendent objects out of nature, he uses the language of science studies to describe Western art practice in his 2002 essay *Iconoclash*: "The denial of mediators, the forgetting of the hand at work in the waking of transcendent objects."¹⁴⁰ They are, according to Latour, *acheiropoietic*—that is, 'not made by any human hand'. The purification of our mediations, that recipe for the transcendent signifier described in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) now identifies the artist's effort "to deny the work of your own hands, to repress the action ever present in the making, fabrication, construction, and production of images, to erase the writing at the same time you are writing it."¹⁴¹

Thus score, text and script fall like Modernist facts into the hands of the performers whose task it is to provide objective accounts of their dicta. As a student of Western classical music, I myself was told over and over by the holders of this tradition to 'get out of the way'; my job is to simply convey what is in the score. We are there to hear from the composer who heard from the heavens. Little wonder then that deaf Beethoven came to represent the ideal Romantic archetype: A creative genius whose inability to hear the noises of the world allowed the man to channel the 'crypto-divine' in an ultra-purified manner. The conveyance of this art to its audience is idealized as a one-way transmission of object (art) to subject (audience) based on the surety that the qualities and meaning of that object are intrinsic to it, or, in the language of aesthetics, co-terminous with it. Therefore communication is uni-directional, with no input from the audience, no implication of the attending subject (the chapter dedicated to the music commission will explore this theme in further detail).

With the dynamics of subject-object dualism characterizing the relationship that links composer to score, score to performer, and performance to audience, the standard idiom of art consumption within a Western practice forms a striking parallel to scientific methodology's desire to eliminate the influence of the subject on the object. In the galleries, concert halls, and playhouses of the Western tradition, the task of the audience is to do everything in their power to eliminate their own presence, short of leaving. Silence, stillness, and

¹⁴⁰ Bruno Latour. "What is Iconoclash, or Is there a World Beyond the Image Wars." 2002. Available online at: <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/84-ICONOCLASH-GB.pdf>. 37.

¹⁴¹ Latour, 2002. 24.

invisibility. The modernist audience is the very model of the Cartesian *res cogitans*, sitting tight in their seats, disembodied minds ingesting l'objet d'art.

While 'acheiropoiesis' is a concept normally applied to religious icons to establish their transcendence (and the power of those who possess them) the trick of removing the surrounding conditions of production in order to establish new versions of the transcendent is done for both science and art in the modern age. Bibles, gravity and symphonies are more commanding signifiers when dissociated from identifiable means of production and assigned transcendent origins. As Latour says in his discussion of iconography, "if you say it is man-made you nullify the transcendence of the divinities, you empty the claims of a salvation from above."¹⁴²

The struggle to change transcendent signifiers from the religious to the scientific and artistic marked a huge shift in consciousness for a large portion of human society. Therefore we can expect nothing smoother when it comes radically challenging their status in the spirit of Latour, Rorty, and other post-modern and post-structuralist thinkers. The push back that was so present in the previous discussion of the IPCC we find also in the world of aesthetics. As Nicolas Bourriaud says in *Relational Aesthetics*, "[We] do not want to see that the world is nothing other than a chaos that people stand up to by means of words and forms."¹⁴³ The struggle to shed modernist absolutes and the security they afford is as present in sustainability as in art or any other form of meaning-making. Thus Rorty's claim that it is indeed "a new self-image for humanity" which is presently at stake.

2.3 From myth to method

This view of art as 'double agent' I build from my own experience as a practising artist combined with largely theoretical engagements from people like Marcuse, Latour, and Rorty, along with elements of Bourriaud, Guattari, and Steiner. Certainly this account ignores highly textured, nuanced and outright contradictory examples, yet I still think we arrive at a defensible characterization of Western art identifying its simultaneously constitutive and critical agencies. It is through this status as double agent, I would like to suggest, that art earns its myth as maker of our minds. In other words, it is in the balance of this capacity to both solidify and undermine that the arts find their purchase on some very nebulous elements of self and world.

¹⁴² Latour, 2002. 7.

¹⁴³ Bourriaud. 2002. 31

Consider the obvious resonance with Heidegger's view of art as that which holds forth world and earth, illuminating reality as it is presently realized while revealing other possible realities lurking beneath this surface. Implied in this is the fundamental need or priority to do both. Such double allegiance also parallels an argument from Sacha Kagan in his identification of art as "double entrepreneurship", able to acquire both aesthetic potency and political agency.¹⁴⁴ Such an acquisition is a challenge he is not flippant about, as he suggests many attempts at double entrepreneurship end up failing to be entrepreneurial in either direction¹⁴⁵ (likely similar to the 'devastating consequences' of Marxist art practices described by Marcuse earlier on).

Therefore, an important distinction between my 'art as a double agent', and Kagan's 'art as a double entrepreneur', is that for me the duplicity remains within the aesthetic, it is the aesthetic that can be simultaneously of and against its larger context. For Kagan, such duplicity necessarily extends into the political as double entrepreneurship is the balance of a political agenda with aesthetic accomplishment. "The dilemma for the artist aiming to bring about social change through direct intervention in society is the following: how can he/she behave as an entrepreneur in social conventions *and* remain an agent of the conventions of his own art world?"¹⁴⁶

My fear is that this reawakens the instrumental demons that were only just laid to rest. I am more conservatively Marcusean. My belief remains that the political agency of art, Kagan's 'entrepreneurial' capacity, that capacity to undermine, create change, remains *in* the aesthetic. The coupling that Kagan argues is 'risky but possible' has too much evidence of its unpromising nature. From largescale examples such as Soviet Socialist Realism, to the more localized objects of Bachmann's complaint or McKibbin's frustration at the outset of this discussion. Instead, I suggest the ideal is not to risk the bird in the hand (aesthetic) for two in the bush, (political and aesthetic), but to discover that the bird in your hand is pregnant. It is the aesthetic that conceives, gestates and births the political, rather than the political being something to which the artist must find a way to balance with aesthetic objectives.¹⁴⁷

Differences aside, both duplicities point towards an important straddling inherent in the question of art's agency in the world. In the way that Kagan's double entrepreneurship must balance political agendas with a commitment to the traditions, idioms, and practices of the aesthetic, my notion of double agency must do the

¹⁴⁴ Kagan, Sacha. "Art Effectuating Social Change: Double Entrepreneurship in Conventions" in Kagan, Sacha and Volker Kirchberg (eds.) *Sustainability: A new frontier for arts and cultures*. Frankfurt: VAS, 2008. 175.

¹⁴⁵ Kagan, 2008. 170.

¹⁴⁶ Kagan, 2008. 170

¹⁴⁷ I am somewhat irresolute in this however, and wish to keep the distinction I am drawing between myself and Kagan on this point as open as possible. Furthermore, I sometimes wonder if the argument I make to distance the artistic process from politics is really that necessary. There is an autonomy I seek to protect, in the name of preserving the freedom of the aesthetic process. But the aesthetic process is so necessarily mysterious and subterranean that explicit positions designed to protect it may amount to the same kinds of constraints one was hoping to avoid. In other words, my instructions to avoid instructions are nonetheless instructions and may have all the unfortunate consequences I am trying to eliminate.

same. For art to manifest the power for which we seek its help, surely it must avail itself of this power by appealing to its idiom and remaining articulate to its larger context. More specifically, if I have volunteered art as a means of reflexivity regarding our worldviews, then it follows that this is only possible if the artistic gesture is to a degree faithful to that worldview. In an improvisatory context, where we have a language or a mode of being that affords an agency by which we play *with* the rules, rather than by them, that play must fall within those rules enough to foster reflexivity about them. Too much rogue agency, too much political entrepreneurship, and the agency of the gesture may be nil.

Thus myth enters method to a degree that feels almost surprisingly practical. By situating the challenge of engaging this larger theoretical argument squarely within the artistic process, the navigation of this challenge by the artists forms the site of inquiry, and the process that ensues, its central preoccupation: Can the artists absorb a discussion about the Modern Constitution and how it shapes our realities? Can they find the impacts of the Modern Constitution in their own practices? Can they begin to improvise with how it manifests itself? Does this form an inspiring invitation to artistic production? What sort of artistic products come out of such a process? Given these questions, it is clear that the methodological focus of this research rests with the artists, the artistic processes, and the artistic products. I am interested in what happens at the level of the aesthetic, how the artist makes sense of the ideas, what processes are invoked to manifest them, and how the resulting works look, sound, and feel in the end.

For the purposes of this preliminary study, I am less interested in how such products are received by their audience, although not entirely. What is important to be explicit about at this juncture, at least for my own clarity of purpose as a researcher, is the question of the causal arrow. That is to say, what is cause and what is effect by this account? I have tried from the outset to distinguish the arts as a place to learn rather than teach, that it is a means to explore more than a tool to inform. Therefore the primary interest here is in the art as effect rather than cause. What art *results* from this process? What are the aesthetic consequences of proceeding this way? What do we find out about these ideas through their exploration in the aesthetic realm? These questions are preliminary to an interest in what the art, in turn, causes in its audience. Yet, as will be clear, we cannot fully engage in what the art is, or what the aesthetic consequences are, without understanding that art within the context of its consumption—unless we recapitulate to a very Modernist instinct and insist this relationship with audience has no bearing on ontology. Therefore the interest in engaging audience response remains an interest in understanding the aesthetic or artistic product that results from this approach.

What is not an interest is what I see as the methodological pitfall of a lot of arts-based research, namely, the preoccupation with what effects the works produce in terms of immediate behavioural consequences. In this regard, the present methodology can either be viewed as preliminary to asking larger instrumental questions

about effects, (in that sorting out the artistic dimensions necessarily comes first), or it can be viewed as simply appealing to this larger myth describing art's cultural agency.

As we have seen, arguments in support of the myth of artistic agency are abundant: Hegel, Schilling, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno, Marcuse, Iris Murdoch, Simone Weil, Gregory Bateson, Harold Bloom, Stanley Fish, Elaine Scarry, Hans Deileman, George Steiner, Nicholas Bourriaud and Martha Nussbaum. All articulate and defend a strong causal role for the arts in promoting reflexive engagement with self and world. Still one might worry that such arguments (as well as my own) are overwhelmingly philosophical, normative and, I fear, potentially nostalgic. Are we too content to look backwards, and in doing so perhaps mistakenly identify too strong a causal relationship between canonical works and their various 'zeitgeists'?

Beyond such a direct, causal arrow being highly implausible, it is unhelpful as well, as it surely lends itself to the linear, instrumental expectations of art this research is trying to shake. Art need not be some singular *primum movens*, first mover, moulding the minds of its era through its purified aesthetic command. Just as often it must receive such power thanks to its reflection of a zeitgeist established by a much more complex conglomerate of forces. Viewing this convoluted dynamic in linear, heroic terms makes art vulnerable to either simplistic or over-inflated estimations of its cultural or societal agency.

Yet even if the causal arrow does not fly straight from aesthetic inspiration to behavioural consequence, few would argue against art's capacity to explore the social, intellectual, and existential themes of its time, interrogating their larger implications for the human condition, distilling and extending those implications to an audience in powerful, and galvanizing ways. Nevertheless, beyond the limits of such philosophical description, I think there is a more empirical appeal we can make to bolster the myth of art as the maker of our minds and permit a level of confidence in its role as a background assumption of this research. That is, to ask what it is that lies behind this consistent and increasing turn to the arts in the wake of an environmental crisis? Where does this instinct, this expectation, come from? Is it because an increasing number of people are starting to read Heidegger and Marcuse? Surely not. Nor, as we have seen, is there a triumphant campaign of empirical research guiding art and sustainability interactions. So what, then, provokes such widespread faith in the agency of art?

I believe this consistent turn to the arts is the tip of an iceberg, beneath which lies an immense amount of hidden empirical data connecting art to worldview, art to self-understanding, art to ontological instinct and metaphysical framings. What keeps us turning to the arts, hope in hand, up here in the visible world, are our own individual encounters with artistic expression, buried in our personal histories yet still palpable for how

they nudged self and world from prior moorings, leaving us in the wake of something undeniably transformative. The linking of artistic experience to our best estimates of where our worlds come from rests on the empiricism of endless personal experience. As George Steiner puts it, “how music possesses us is a question to which we know no credible, let alone materially examinable answer. All we have are further images. And the defiant self-evidence of human experience.”¹⁴⁸

The deft task lies in turning forward. Again, the shift from the descriptive to the prescriptive. Taking what we treasure in our histories and seeking the conditions whereby such agency might be reborn. The aim of this discussion is to justify a focus on the artistic dimensions in the name of trying to better understand the delicate nature of shifting from descriptive to prescriptive engagement with artistic practices. In doing so I confess I ignore worthy research questions pertaining to the audience, questions of responsibility, agency, action, behaviour, etc. My sense is that the arts have jumped too quickly into a relationship with sustainability under blind cause-effect assumptions about the relationship between information and behaviour. The result was an all too often simplistic dynamic that worked little magic on either the art world or prevailing assumptions about sustainability more generally.

The hope here is to avail of an expansive view of the sustainability problem as a means to a rich and open inquiry via the languages of art. At the same time, I expect such expanse to be only useful if the arts are allowed their status as epistemology, as genuine means of exploration, and not tool for informing the public. It is, in other words, an argument for autonomy of process, though not an argument for autonomy of purpose. It rests on strong claims for the capacity of art, while aiming to avoid assigning itself widespread heroism in any immediate sense.

2.4 Research design

In order to focus on the artistic process and products that this theoretical argument might provoke, I commissioned new work from four different artists - poet, composer, playwright and architect. The first step in this process was the development of a document outlining the ideas at play in this study. The commission was titled ‘The Implicated Subject: Too Late for the Gods, Too Early for Being’ (for full text, see Appendix A). This title was taken from a poem by Heidegger¹⁴⁹ and used to capture the idea that we are somehow at a liminal phase historically speaking. Latour’s description of the Modern Constitution and its relationship to sustainability explores the twilight of the transcendent signifier. Like Rorty’s last stand of redemptive truth, the endgame of the Modern Constitution is, according to Latour, presently being played out in the

¹⁴⁸ Steiner, 1989. 198.

¹⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger, ‘The Thinker as Poet’ in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hopfstadter, trans. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. 4.

sustainability crisis. What the Modern Constitution is and how it connects to issues of sustainability was, hopefully, laid out fairly clearly in the commission.

However, as Heidegger suggests with the line “too late for the Gods, too early for Being” that while we might be in the twilight of one age, this does not necessarily mean we are perched at the dawn of another. We may well be in for a stretch of darkness before we learn to illuminate our realities in new and immanent ways. Heidegger seems eerily prescient in his capacity to anticipate the tension found in the early 21st century, almost a hundred years after he was writing. We are too late for absolute descriptions, too late for redemptive truth, as we saw this in the IPCC example, in Latour’s notion of hybridity, and Rorty’s discussion of materialist metaphysics. And yet, as all these examples demonstrated, we arrive too early to make the transition towards Being, towards understanding ourselves as performers of the ontological difference, a self-concept as worlding agents, self-aware citizens of the Anthropocene.

And so, in Heideggerian fashion, the problem is put to art. Can we explore this transition from Gods to Being, from objectivity to intersubjectivity, from dualism to hybridity, transcendence to immanence? I did my best to make sure the commission was indeed an invitation to explore, learn about, play around with these themes using one’s own instincts as an artist. The aim was to avoid asking artists to create art ‘about’ the ideas, but rather provoke a curiosity, drive an individual sense of wonder about the issues rather than assign content to be illustrated artistically. The hope here was, first, to find a way to engage art within the challenge of sustainability while maintaining it as a space in which to learn, to find things out, rather than turning it into a tool used to teach or inform. Secondly, I wanted to see if I could provoke works that are able to speak to sustainability without necessarily having to speak about it by drawing formal parallels rather than identifying content in need of address. Therefore, rather than commissioning works that would ‘communicate’ issues of subject-object dualism or the Modern Constitution, the objective was to use artistic capacity purely as a means of exploration in whatever ways the artists saw fit. (For the commission document see appendix ‘A’).

2.4.1 Artist selection

The selection of artists was done with several factors in mind. First and foremost of these was the issue of aesthetic merit. This is perhaps one of the most problematic issues in the relationship between research communities and the arts. Patricia Leavy, in *Method Meets Art* [2009] dedicates a single page to the issue of merit as it arises in the field of Arts Based Research.¹⁵⁰ This is not out of a denial of its importance, as she says, “the more effective the artistic aspects are, the more likely the research is to affect audiences in their

¹⁵⁰ Patricia Leavy. *Method Meets Art*. The Guilford Press. New York. 2009.

intended ways.” Yet at the same time, she concedes that this quality is probably going to be negatively impacted when used for research purposes.

Although in the best cases art provokes, inspires, captivates and reveals, certainly not all art can meet these standards. Throw some novices into the mix who create art for their research and even less of what is produced is likely to meet the aesthetic ideals developed in the fine arts.¹⁵¹

Leavy seems aware of the contradiction, that the effectiveness of the aesthetic domain is connected to aesthetic merit, yet research agendas and practices likely hamper this quality. I found her resolution to the problem to be surprising, however. Rather than trying to find ways of connecting art with research agendas and practices that preserve conditions conducive to aesthetic merit, “the research community needs to expand concepts of “good art” to accommodate these methodological practices.”¹⁵² Meaning we should not worry about whether the art reveals, evokes, or captivates? But isn’t that why it was being used? As she indicates, “the important questions are: How does the work make one feel? What does the work evoke or provoke? What does the work reveal?”¹⁵³ Is it not disingenuous to acknowledge aesthetic merit as the reason the arts are powerful, seek their use on those grounds, acknowledge that such use hinders aesthetic merit and then ‘resolve’ this uncomfortable position by demoting its importance?

This is not meant to turn Leavy’s work into a whipping post as I think she is more sensitive to this issue than many. Without a doubt the marriage between art and research is tricky and necessarily unpredictable, and it remains so for my research as well. What I found disappointing was to be sensitive enough to raise the issue of aesthetic merit as vital to the larger enterprise and vulnerable within the present interactions, and yet nonetheless ultimately expendable as a criterion for why art is of interest just because it is difficult to preserve promising conditions for its achievement in research contexts as they are currently structured. Arts-Based Research is willing to drop the importance of aesthetic merit rather than critically engage its own research conditions? Surely we ought not dismiss the qualities of a process or product due to difficulties recreating them on our own terms. Particularly after we acknowledge their importance. If we were trying to synthesize an organic compound in a lab due to its medicinal qualities but found those qualities difficult to reproduce, would we then dismiss the importance of those qualities in order to maintain our laboratory practices?

Beyond incoherent and counterproductive, speaking as an artist for a moment, I find this approach to be disrespectful of rich and deeply disciplined practices that have worked hard to build up relationships with

¹⁵¹ Leavy. 2009. 17

¹⁵² Leavy. 2009. 17

¹⁵³ Leavy. 2009. 17

their publics over time. It dismisses the immense labour that went into creating the concentration of value within a particular discipline of which researchers freely avail themselves when they turn to the arts. That the source of this value is not acknowledged, or, as above, when it is acknowledged but discarded when inconvenient, strikes me as deeply problematic. Where are the ‘appropriation of voice’ arguments when it comes to aesthetic practices?

Perhaps thanks to the long shadow of Bourdieu it is too easy to read this socio-economically, that art is a luxury whose integrity needs to be deconstructed along some sort of Marxist line.¹⁵⁴ Certainly, there are arts that are typically privileged fare. But that is not the distinction that is being made here. I know many unprivileged musicians who are not classically trained, who do not play music of a so-called sophisticated ilk, but who apply themselves with incredible diligence to learn, internalize and fully possess their craft, whether that is blues, hip-hop, folk, rock and roll, etc. Distinct from questions of inclusivity, I am speaking of a humility and dedication to process, one that says to itself, ‘in order to avail of the expressive power in this tradition, I will respect it and apply myself to it, I will pay my dues. I will not take it and assume I can use it for my needs without respecting its integrity. Furthermore, I will not reproduce it in some inauthentic form and then assume I can say the first thing about it.’

As I have mentioned above, I feel that what turns us towards the arts is rooted in our past encounters. Encounters where the expressive power of art was transformative. This then turns into incoherent hopes of re-creating that power without due respect for its sources. If the goal is to find out what climate policy discussions look like when the discussants are finger-painting their opinions, that is undoubtedly an interesting avenue of research, but one that has more in common with the use of ‘Duck-Duck-Goose’ or ‘Farmer in the Dell’ than art. Maybe Arts-Based Research should be called Play-Based-Research? *Not as a demotion whatsoever*, but simply a more precise indication of its priorities? However, if the goal is to seek the translation of a given set of ideas into the languages and practices of the artistic community in the hopes of fostering a rich dialogue and symbolization around a given set of issues, then the integrity of that community deserves more respect than it typically receives in research contexts.¹⁵⁵

Predictably, George Steiner takes this concern much further. Without addressing some of the contradictions of Arts Based Research identified here, Steiner is deeply skeptical about the interaction between the arts and academic curiosity in general. The benefits to each, he describes rather amusingly.

¹⁵⁴ Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, Harvard University Press. 1984. 68-77; 91-92. .

¹⁵⁵ I don’t want to get overly sidetracked by this issue but I think artistic traditions might consider looking at some of the misappropriation of voice arguments that helped clarify respectful use and engagement with various public identities.

The material benefits for the recipients of academic bounty are obvious. The poet, playwright, composer, gets room and board, a workshop, a captive audience. For its part, academe profits from exposure to innovations, to anarchic vitality and the leaven of bad manners.¹⁵⁶

I'm not sure who should be offended by such a statement, the artist as *enfant terrible*, or academia for the suggestion that they cannot offer any bad manners of their own accord. It is, of course, the costs of this interaction that are of more concern here.

The negative aspects are subtler. Intimacies between the process of creation and that of analytic discursive reflection are not native. Constrained by the very ambience of academic hospitality to a deliberative practice of self-awareness and self-explanation, the painter-in-residence, the poet in the seminar, the composer at the lectern, will find himself ousted from the exigent isolation, from the inchoate dynamics, opaque to himself, of his calling. The welcoming scrutiny he receives can render him falsely transparent.

Even when he is not a guest on campus, today's [artist] is, as never before, under pressure of academic attention and expectations. Consciously or not, numerous poets – Auden being among the first to have registered and explored the damaging paradox – begin to write the type of poem that will reward the structural analyses of college and university classes. The novelist patterns for ambiguities, for polysemic densities of the kind prized and 'taught' by the explicator...Distorting courtesies of reception obtain between artist and explainer. To a degree which is difficult to determine, the esoteric impulse in twentieth-century music, literature and the arts reflects calculation. It looks to the flattery of academic and hermeneutic notice.

The Saturn of explication devours that which it adopts.¹⁵⁷

Several themes that will return throughout the rest of this discussion are raised here and worth noting before moving on: The increased self-consciousness working within an academic narrativizing of one's creative genre, and the explicit assumption from Steiner that such engagement infringes on a sacred aspect of the creative life, the 'exigent isolation' of the artist. Is this the only way to access 'inchoate dynamics' of one's calling? While these two themes will factor heavily in the coming empirical chapters, for now, Steiner's concern serves to illustrate the difficulty in trying to align research processes with creative processes, while maintaining the integrity of each.

¹⁵⁶ Steiner, 1989. 37.

¹⁵⁷ Steiner, 1989. 37-38.

With this in mind, several criteria were used in trying to connect this conversation with sustainability to artistic languages in ways that respected those languages.

1) Artistic Capacity: In each case, the artists of the commission were highly-accomplished, well-established practitioners (see below for a complete roster).

2) General practitioners: The focus of this research is to broaden the 'art-environment' interaction beyond its typical boundaries. Therefore, I wanted to engage artists who did not necessarily identify as 'eco-artists' or environmental artists and find the strategies that inspired this more generalized range of artists to get involved.

3) Thoughtful Creators – Because the commission material was fairly dense, there was a hefty intellectual component to dealing with the project. Not all artists work well with this sort of material, and it was important for me to select a group that felt comfortable with a fairly dense set of ideas at the outset.

I was fortunate to attract the following artists to this commission:

Don McKay – poet – Don is a member of the Order of Canada for his contribution to Literary Arts, winner of the Griffin Prize for Poetry and two Governor General's Award. Don is widely considered one of Canada's premiere literary talents.

Kevin Kerr – theatre – Kevin is a Governor General's Award winning playwright and artistic director of The Electric Company Theatre, an internationally acclaimed group specializing in devised theatre, and incorporating high tech elements into live performance.

Derek Kaplan – Visual Artist and Architect with Bing Tom Architects in Vancouver, Derek has a rich background in philosophy to the probing the larger conceptual and experiential components of design, both in two and three dimensions.

Giorgio Magnanensi – Giorgio is Director of Vancouver New Music and an acclaimed composer on both sides of the Atlantic. Recently he has become more involved in alternative approaches to music composition and performance.

Each of the artists accepted the commission in the late fall of 2010 and had approximately one year to complete a work or series of works (for a detailed timeline, see appendix B).¹⁵⁸

As part of the GCC, each commission received public presentation during the academic year of 2011-2012. Don McKay read to an almost sold-out event at the Vancouver Festival of Writers and Readers on October 23, 2011; Electric Company Theatre performed four sold-out shows at the Vancouver Planetarium in December of 2011; Giorgio Magnanensi and his ensemble performed a live show at the Centre for Interactive Research on Sustainability, UBC on March 18th, 2012; and Derek Kaplan's work was available for public viewing from March 18th until March 29th, 2012 also at CIRS, UBC.

2.4.2 Evaluation methods

Exploring the process and products of this commission project involved very simple means, primarily interviews and analysis of the artworks, with an online survey for one of the four commissions. For the interviews, there were three main categories of participants: artists, collaborators and audience. The artist interviews were conducted in three stages: introductory, pre-event and post-event (with multiple interviews at this third stage). This three-fold structure along with the specific theme for each stage was based loosely on Bourriaud's work with relational artists:

Relational artists perceive their work from a threefold viewpoint, at once aesthetic (how it is to be translated in material terms?) historical (how is it to be incorporated in a set of artistic references?) and social (how is it to find a coherent position with regard to the current state of production and social relations?).¹⁵⁹

Changing the sequence in order to align it with a dynamic creative process developing over time (such as the present commission) yielded a loose framework that featured a historical focus first, then aesthetic, and finally, social.

The introductory interview, therefore, sought the artists' own thoughts about how the ideas of the commission fit within the larger history of their artistic practices. In order to accomplish this, it was first important to assess how the commission was taking root. Was there a comfort with its ideas? Were they

¹⁵⁸ It has not escaped my noticing, nor was it my intention to end up with a roster lacking different gender and racial perspectives. Western classical arts such as music, for example, are heavily populated by non-white females, I suggest they outnumber the white males considerably. So despite sticking to a certain tradition of practice, I had no assumption that my participant selection would like a 19th century crew of white men. I had anticipated that two of the four commissions would be led by female artists but in both cases the candidates had moved on to more lucrative and high profile work.

¹⁵⁹ Bourriaud, 2002. 46.

resonant and inspiring, or awkward and problematic? How did the artists foresee working with them? Then, given my argument regarding the relationship between the Modern Constitution and Western art practice, I needed to establish the relationship between this larger conceptual framework and the historical practice of each artist's discipline. Such a connection was grounded in the artists' perspective, how did they identify the connections between a 'Modern Constitution' and the specific traditions of design, poetry, music or theatre? This offered something of a baseline by which to gauge the efforts of each artist to contend with the commission themes. Once these three areas were established—commission literacy, initial orientation, and historical context—the artists were more or less left alone. Following cautionary arguments from Steiner and others, as well as my own instincts on the matter, the idea was to have as little impact on the creative process as possible, an attempt to let the work germinate as if research expectations were non-existent.

Once the works were more or less completed, it was possible to shift a conversation about the commission from the intellectual/historical to the aesthetic, or as Bourriaud says, to explore a translation of ideas into material terms. This interview established an initial sense of the creative direction that was taken, the ways in which the commission entered aesthetic practice, the kinds of opportunities and obstacles it presented and the artist's own personal relationship to the process and product in advance of the work having any public life. The intention here was to understand the artists' own perception of their process moving from the ideas of the commission to their aesthetic practice, as well as identify what elements remained unanswered for them leading up to the event.

Following the presentation of works, and their entrance into a social context, the goal was to gauge the artists' reactions to the work in a more final phase, once 'consumed' by some version of a public. As in some cases the works were intentionally incomplete until attended to by a public audience, leaving major questions open in the minds of the artists until this stage of the process. At this stage it was possible for the interaction of the work with the ideas of the commission to be taken into account more fully. It was also more likely that artists could look to the future at this stage and contemplate what futures their approaches to the commission might have.

In the case of the theatre and music projects, the involvement of large teams of collaborators presented an opportunity to engage expert witnesses who had joined the project without necessarily being involved in the theoretical interests behind it. This provided terrific material to help compare the present commission to other work in their genre of practice.

To varying degrees, interviews with audience members were conducted in an attempt grasp the experience the works made possible. This factored more prominently in the theatre, music and poetry events, however the

presentation conditions of the architecture project were not ideal and limited the audience's capacity to experience the project. In the case of the theatre project, an online survey was sent to all audience members. Fifty-six completed surveys were returned, (%25 return rate).

In all cases the interviews were loosely structured. While interview scripts were developed, they served as backups where conversation did not flow easily. Following the establishment of the central themes and key talking points, I did my best to follow the participants as much as possible.

In evaluating each separate commission, I had to find an appropriate balance between a focus on interview data and a focus on the work itself. This generally depended on whether the commissioned work was itself more inclined towards product or process. For example, the poetry commission produced a published work but did so through very standard approaches to producing poetry. Thus the work was a very stable, complete entity yet its development process was largely invisible to me. In this case, much of my exploration was focused on the completed work. However, both the theatre and music projects took very process-oriented approaches to engaging the commission document. Both produced highly experimental works that were, in effect, 'works in process'. In this case, more analytical effort was dedicated to the 'how' rather than the 'what.' It was in large part the process itself that became so interesting to investigate, and thus demanded greater emphasis on interviews with the artists and collaborative teams and less of a focus on the completed work or the experience of the work by an audience.

What remains to be clarified here is a sense of what I was looking for in these commissions, a soft hypothesis brought to an exploration of the works themselves. What did I expect to find in the outcomes of the process? The title of the commission given to the artists was *The Implicated Subject*, pointing to the ways in which our subjectivities are deeply involved in composing the realities we experience, contrary to dualist accounts. How, in other words, might hybridity be explored, expressed or experienced? As identified in the discussion of Western art-making practices and the Modern Constitution, subjects and objects were kept distinct from one another through idioms of production and consumption. Using the introductory interview to establish a baseline condition for the artists and their genre, I could investigate attempts to increase a level of emergent interactivity within the creative process, both on the production and consumption side of the work. From a production point of view, I was interested in how and where the process of making new work moves away from more Romanticized, purified creative gestures towards more interactive processes. Was there an attempt to find work within the immanent interactions of some collective (human or non-human)? Could new work be an emergent phenomenon? If so, what did such processes look like? And when such efforts were made what opportunities or 'benefits' were gained, and what lost?

On the consumption side, I was asking the same question Bourriaud poses in *Relational Aesthetics*, “What is form that is essentially relational?”¹⁶⁰ In other words, was the work able to invite the audience to experience various degrees of interactivity, possibly even its own implication in the work? Was there some element that allowed an experience of the experience of the work to become integral to it? In other words, were we able to find the meaning of the work as collectively produced between self and work, subject and object, thus dissolving that apparent divide between audience and art, self and world? Bourriaud claims that “the aura of art no longer lies in the hinterland represented by the work, now in the form itself, but in front of it, within the temporary collective form that it produces by being put on show.”¹⁶¹ Did the artists pursue this possibility? If so, how? And to what benefit and what cost?

An evaluation of the artistic process and products is structured by three main categories. First, the relationship to the Modern Constitution, how is it present in the tradition and practice of the artist? How is it engaged and challenged in the creative process undertaken here? This leads directly to a second category of evaluation, art as double agent. In trying to engage and challenge the structuring influence of the larger idioms of a given tradition, how was that balancing act between reliable and rogue agencies struck? Third, it remains a fundamental preoccupation of this research to better understand the process of connecting art practices to non-aesthetic concerns. As discussed previously, the instinct to involve the arts in questions of sustainability strikes me as a good one, the invitation that typically ensues does not. A major concern of the concluding discussion will attempt to take the four empirical chapters that deal with the issues raised above, and attempt some comparative discussion that may shed light on the variable effectiveness of the prescriptive approach taken here. What did I learn about this approach to structuring the relationship between art and its non-aesthetic concern?

Lastly, as much as I am interested in art, I am equally interested in what I have called the ‘failure of ontology’ with regard challenges of sustainability, in other words, the struggle to exit Modernity with its structuring dichotomies, fact *or* value, culture *or* nature, subject *or* object. What can a series of artworks tell us about this non-modern world? Do they manage to generate a series of ‘existential metaphors’ that illustrates a different way of being in the world? If the idioms of production and consumption of traditional Western art practices propagate metaphors for subject-object dualism, if they teach us how to imagine the world in Cartesian terms, as I suggest they do, could these four works help illustrate the challenges and opportunities associated with generating and exchanging metaphors that evoke a very different self-world relationship?

¹⁶⁰ Bourriaud, 2002. 21.

¹⁶¹ Bourriaud, 2002. 61.

From Bruno Latour I borrow the compelling term “experimental metaphysics” (and he may have borrowed the term from various quantum mechanics folks). The idea that we could ‘reach up’ and tinker with our metaphysical frameworks in search of greater harmony with urgent contexts of practice has an enchanting feel to it. Magic wands, magic lamps, magic potions, frogs we have kissed, and four commissioned works of art all promising radical transformations of self and world? Doubtless a bumpier path awaits.

Chapter 3: Listening with Language

Each of the next four chapters is dedicated to one of the four works commissioned for this research. In this respect they might all begin with the same introduction. The theory and methodology put forward for this study are an attempt to forge a relationship between art and sustainability on several interrelated points: First, that art is best considered epistemological, that aesthetic practice is most potent within a spirit of inquiry; second, that art is uniquely capable of offering reflexivity towards our broader conceptual frameworks; and third, that art is something of a double agent, at once faithful and subversive to these larger conceptual framings. As I hope to show, Western artistic practices are able to engage the Modern Constitution precisely because they themselves are shaped by it. Where might this ‘Modern Constitution’ exist if not within aspects of our expressive, imaginative languages? So much of the ‘world’ of a work of art (in the Heideggerian sense), its tools and its idioms, complies with and reinforces this conceptual framework. And yet, as I also hope becomes apparent, because it is art, Heidegger’s ‘earth’—the unworlding of such a world—may prove uniquely available.

In this chapter on the poetry of Don McKay we find these themes to manifest most acutely in the negotiations of subject-object relations through their linguistic representations and the ‘map-territory’ issues that awaken as a result. Perhaps all conceiving of and representing the world has a tendency to reduce what is being conceptualized and represented to those conceptions and representations. That is, we fail to notice what is not on our maps (words, images, numbers, models, and languages). Within the context of Modernism, the grip of our reductions is particularly tight thanks to a faith that we have developed the capacity to represent the world objectively for the first time and amassed enough plausibility to make this faith fairly blind.¹⁶² For much of the Modern period our maps were convincing enough to allow us to forget the territory lay anywhere else. Yet, as was explored in chapter 1, sustainability is the eye-opener for the Modern world, the territory’s revolt. McKay’s engagement with the GCC commission is an attempt to take up this issue within the intimate world of poetry. It is McKay’s latest and most explicit effort to find in the poetic gesture a reversal of the reductive engagement of objectification, what he will call ‘*thingification*’ instead.

3.1 An artist in the borderlands

Don McKay is widely regarded as Canada’s premiere nature poet, even heralded as “one of the top poets writing in English today.”¹⁶³ He has been awarded the Order of Canada, won the Governor General’s award

¹⁶² I lack the capacity to address this issue empirically, but my hunch is that is that Modernism isn’t that unusual in this regard, it is just a lot more convincing, which has been both its success and its imminent undoing.

¹⁶³ Mark Frutkin. *Book Review #9 Another Gravity by Don McKay*. Available online: http://markfrutkin.blogspot.ca/2011_04_01_archive.html

for poetry twice (1991, 2011), and received the world's largest English-language poetry prize, the Griffin (2007). What makes McKay so pertinent to this research is his own ongoing preoccupation with this problem of representation, particularly as this pertains to the non-human, and the relevance of this for how we relate to the world around us.

Perhaps anyone classified as a nature poet can be expected to hold a certain suspicion towards the reduction of the world to numbers and laws so central to the scientific rationalism of Modernity. McKay is no exception. Yet he is equally resistant to the reactionary position best identified with 19th century Romanticism, where sentiment and imagination push back against priorities of reason and method, and nature emerges as a moral bastion against surging industrialization. That McKay shares a Romantic devotion to the natural world is unmistakable. It was, he has stated, through a connection to landscape that he found his poetic voice.¹⁶⁴ Yet for him, the reactionary pitting of sentiment against reason has its own pitfalls. In *Vis à Vis* [2002], a prose work by McKay in which he analyzes the act of writing poetry, he states: "Romanticism, which begins in the contemplation of nature, ends in the celebration of the creative imagination in and for itself."¹⁶⁵ He calls this "Aeolian Harpism," a sense of "nature playing through you and [effortlessly] transferring itself into language."¹⁶⁶

If the scientific offense was to over-rationalize the world by converting it into 'universal' measurements, the Romantic offense is to over-sentimentalize it, converting it into private imaginative and emotional response. Here the problem of representation arises in both directions, opposite ways of mistaking map for territory. Whether the objectivity of the scientific account or the subjectivity of the poetic account, the object in question is lost to its representation, muzzled by contrasting anthropocentrisms.¹⁶⁷

The map-territory problem is not unique to chemists and poets. Mistaking representations for the things themselves is a general theme in the unraveling of Modernism over the past century. Central to post-modern thought is the attempt to deal with this through asserting the map as fundamental to the human condition. We are always already our linguistic and cultural categories. If we are not muzzling 'the other' (Modernism),

¹⁶⁴ Ken Babstock. "The Appropriate Gesture, or Regular Dumb-Ass Guy Looks at a Bird" [Interview with Don McKay] in *Don McKay: Essays on His Works*, edited by Brian Barlett. Toronto: Guernica 2006. 170.

¹⁶⁵ Don McKay. *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness*. Gaspereau Press. 2002. 28.

¹⁶⁶ Barbara Colebrook-Peace. "A Gift to the Wingless" in *Don McKay: Essays on His Works*, edited by Brian Barlett. Toronto: Guernica 2006. 119.; Babstock, 2002. 171.

¹⁶⁷ However much the scientific community might resist the charge of anthropocentrism, I offer it here to describe the degree to which a non-human entity is trapped within human systems of measurement and description.

then we are putting words in its mouth (Romanticism). The post-modern agenda is to assert this epistemic limitation of being human, solving map-territory problems by dismissing access to the territory outright.¹⁶⁸

For the purpose of argument, we might characterize Modernism, Romanticism, and Post-Modernism as each offering a totalizing view of the world: Modernism and the reduction of the world to numbers and laws; Romanticism, to sentiment and imagination; and Post-Modernism to language and human construction. McKay's interest is in seeking residence in the borderlands, between these dichotomous territories. Rather than holing up in one to disavow the other, he aims to capture the strengths of each one without staying long enough to acquire its blindness. Or in more concrete terms, McKay seeks the purchase on the world offered by the analytical methods of science, yet wishes to remain an experiencing subject, capturing the insight of such analysis through emotional and imaginative response, while then translating that response into language all while remaining attentive to realities which lie beyond the reach of linguistic effort.

In the spirit of Latour's 'non-modern world' and Rorty's 'literary culture', McKay is seeking his own way out of Modernism while trying to avoid joining either of its rebellions. How he goes about this and what stance it offers him as a subject in the world provide essential context within which to view the new work created in response to the Greenest City Conversations commissioning project.

3.2 The Double Agent: metaphors to unmap the world

The primary means by which Don McKay manages to find, hold, and express his heterogeneous view of the world is metaphor. Metaphor emerges as central to his hopes for poetry by both inviting and destabilizing the fiefdoms of Modernism, Romanticism, and Post-Modernism. Fittingly, critic Ross Leckie refers to metaphor as 'polyphony', the capacity for multiple voices to all 'sing' at once (though, crucially, not in unison). "It is this polyphony that allows [the] poet to maintain a truly attentive poetics of epistemology that is responsive to the requirements of the world."¹⁶⁹ Or in the words of McKay himself:

I am working on the same old problem,
how to be both
knife and spoon¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ For example, Richard Rorty's dismissal of knowledge as an attempt to get the world 'right', see *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge University Press. 1989. 7-8; or Foucault's extended meditation on how the relationship between knowledge and power supersedes the relationship between knowledge and truth.

¹⁶⁹ Ross Leckie. "Don McKay's "Twinflower": Poetry's Far Cry and Close Call" in *Don McKay: Essays on His Works*, edited by Brian Barlett. Toronto: Guernica 2006. 128.

¹⁷⁰ Don McKay. *Apparatus*. McClelland and Stewart. 1997. 4.

As McKay says, metaphor functions as “a hinge between romantic and scientific prejudices,”—a way of accessing language from heart and mind.¹⁷¹ As Leckie puts it, “either the knife’s analytical and dissecting power or the spoon’s ability to hold something quivering in its difficult being.”¹⁷² At a superficial level, metaphor is perhaps an idiom of sorts, whereby the collision of incongruous imagery demands heightened attention in order to reconcile this illogicality.¹⁷³ We pleasure in riddling out the unlikely juxtapositions of metaphor and thus pay them more attention than standard fare.

But beneath word games something more ominous is afoot. A good metaphor instills a rapid oscillation in our brains between truth and falsity. As McKay says, in order for a metaphor to be true, it has to be simultaneously false.¹⁷⁴ Its communicative power lies in its ostensible incoherence. This power is not just a result of the extra work we invest in making sense of the image, but something deeper. “You,” says the speaker of the poem, “are my sunshine.” By using a system of meaning to state something that is false within the system’s rules—*which we nonetheless experience to be true*—language and meaning break apart. Meaning slips from the word. Territory withdraws from the map. In our distant awareness a reality beyond representation rises, however brief and ungraspable.

Like a knot in the wood’s grain, despite being made from language metaphor is its undoing. “Metaphor is the rupture of language as a grid, as a system of utility, as a heavily policed symbolic-order.”¹⁷⁵ Metaphor is rogue representation whose success depends wholly on our willingness to follow its leap off the canvas of language, beyond the limits of words and into the elusive resonance we share with its author. Where art was identified in the previous chapter as a double agent within culture, able to offer reflexivity towards fundamental conditions of a given system (i.e. worldview), metaphor is the double agent of language, both availing of and undermining it as a totalizing system.

This is double agency in action. “You” the speaker of the poem would have to confess “do not produce warmth, nor light.” Yet in recognizing “you” as the speaker’s “sunshine”, we recognize that sunshine produces something beyond temperature and photons, and that something points to what “you” produces for the speaker. The word evokes yet fails to capture all there is to know. There is more to our experience of sunshine than we are able to map in language. Nevertheless, this ‘more’, this remnant, however unsayable, *is* known, as the success of the metaphor attests.

¹⁷¹ Don McKay, Interview, May 6, 2011.

¹⁷² Leckie. 2006. 140.

¹⁷³ Kevin Bushell. “Don McKay and Metaphor: Stretching Language Towards Wilderness.” in *Don McKay: Essays on His Works*, edited by Brian Barlett. Toronto: Guernica 2006. 63.

¹⁷⁴ McKay, Interview, May 6, 2011.

¹⁷⁵ Leckie. 2006. 142.

Through this double agency—or in McKay’s terms, simultaneous truth and falsity—metaphor accomplishes the kind of ontological reflexivity discussed by Hans Dieleman and others. It allows us to know beyond the systems of meaning we typically employ, and not just about the object in question, but about ourselves and our world. Yet once metaphor is understood as epistemology, the ontological implications are significant. The power of metaphor comes at a price.

What is the nature of this price? What is reality that contains a realm beyond representation? What is the depth above which language floats? What is the ‘more’ in our experience of sunshine? Is it mere human construct? If it lies beyond language, how can it be? How can it be ‘made up’ without the tools of make-believe? But if it lies in experience then surely it is subjective? What are these depths that both require us for their existence, and yet, of which we cannot fully speak?

These questions might seem profoundly incoherent were it not for Martin Heidegger. Understanding metaphorical action without having first encountered Heidegger’s sense of reality might be enough to deter one from its implications. With such arguments in hand, however, metaphor offers a tantalizing phenomenology of what may have seemed a very peculiar notion of the world. In its double agency, its true-false simultaneity, metaphor peels meaning from language, revealing an awareness of something beyond it. This is what Heidegger identifies as poetry’s capacity to reveal hidden ‘earth’ beneath present ‘world’.¹⁷⁶ At the same time, however, we encounter ourselves as inextricable from the act of realizing our own realities. Subject-object boundaries collapse as metaphorical action leans us towards our own agency at work creating the reality we encounter.

From this it is important to have two points in hand. First, that metaphor awakens a sense of reality beyond representation, the unworlded, unconceptualized realm beneath the representations realized by present conceptual frameworks. This adds an ontological edge to the point that Rorty makes in crediting Cervantes and Shakespeare with the genesis of the literary age. Rorty’s primary point seems to be that fiction demonstrates such a multiplicity of human conditions that singular truth collapses under the weight of pluralism.¹⁷⁷ Here, the agency of the literary gesture goes further, to undermine redemptive truth at an epistemological level, that is, rather than a whole bunch of different ‘worlds’, we are confronted by Heidegger’s ‘earth’ beneath those worlds. Secondly, metaphor gives us a sense of ourselves as hopelessly inextricable from our worlds. We are indeed world-makers, composing realities in the interpretive act of experience. Metaphor cannot work in lieu of an experiencing subject, and it cannot work without our own experiencing agency, and yet the good ones seem so true.

¹⁷⁶ Heidegger, 1975. 45.

¹⁷⁷ Richard Rorty. “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre, in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. Philosophical Papers, Vol. 4. 2007. 11.

Thus metaphor deflates Modernist priorities of absolute descriptions and subject-object isolations. Instead, they offer what McKay refers to as ‘wilderness’. For McKay, wilderness indicates “not just a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind’s appropriations.”¹⁷⁸ Wilderness is an “extra-linguistic realm”¹⁷⁹, a “placeless place” beyond the mind’s categories.¹⁸⁰ The resonance this shares with Heidegger’s ‘earth’ is sufficient to suggest the terms are synonymous. Like Heidegger’s ‘earth’, McKay’s wilderness so often enters our awareness through art, as wilderness is always included in metaphorical action.¹⁸¹ McKay even shares an existentialist angst at living with an ear to the wilderness beyond our grasp: “The sadness of metaphor stems from an awareness of lost things as we waken to the teeming life outside the language we inhabit.”¹⁸²

McKay illustrates the moment our awareness happens upon “wilderness”:

Amateur naturalists trying to identify a plant or animal frequently experience a sort of vertigo as they stand, field guide in hand, beside a trail, registering the incommensurability of the plant’s infinitude of parts, processes and ecological relations with the tag that attaches it to language and makes it accessible to intelligence... Even apt names touch but a tiny portion of the creature, place or thing. When that vertigo arrives, we’re aware of the abject thinness of language, while simultaneously realizing its necessity. As with tools, it is often during such momentary breakdowns that we sense the enormous, unnamable wilderness beyond it – a wilderness we both know and long for and fear.¹⁸³

This epistemological dilemma—the inevitability yet inadequacy of language in the face of experience—leads us to “a sea-sickness caused by the rational unaccountability of the world.”¹⁸⁴ Vertigo or nausea captures the experience of glimpsed earth, sudden wilderness, a loss of balance when shoved by metaphor, the trickster of language.

As we teeter there, in a moment suddenly invaded by the experience of a thing’s wilderness, McKay suggests we encounter a choice. “This is a point of crisis, which must resolve into one of its elements, longing or fear; it is a peak on which we can’t live. A fearful response may lead to aggressive rationalism, and the defensive reduction of wilderness to standing reserve – its use-value. But longing, well, longing leads to poetry.”¹⁸⁵ In

¹⁷⁸ McKay, 2002. 21.

¹⁷⁹ Bushell, 2006. 60.

¹⁸⁰ McKay, 2002. 87, 21.

¹⁸¹ McKay, 2002. 21, 57, 71.

¹⁸² McKay, 2002. 72.

¹⁸³ McKay, 2002. 63.

¹⁸⁴ McKay, 2002. 64.

¹⁸⁵ McKay, 2002. 64.

the moment that we choose longing over fear and resist the urge to resolve our vertigo via ‘aggressive rationalism’ we arrive at what McKay calls *poetic attention*. “It’s a sort of readiness, a species of longing which is without the desire to possess.”¹⁸⁶ Poetic attention is McKay’s check against rationalism’s urge to reduce the object of attention, as well as Romanticism’s urge to leap into language. By contrast, poetic attention offers something of a stabilizing posture whereby we hold steady in the experience of that which lies beyond the limits of any system’s capacity to capture the object.

This is not, however, an argument for pre-linguistic perception: “Language is already there in poetic attention; like an athlete at her limit, language is experiencing its speechlessness and the need to stretch itself to be adequate to this form of knowing.”¹⁸⁷ A mountain may be insurmountable, yet not unapproachable. “A poem, or poem-in-waiting contemplates what language can’t do: then it does something with language.”¹⁸⁸ Thus, even once the linguistic act begins, the element of wilderness remains, not in its supposed articulation (the Romantic conceit) but with the acknowledgement of both its primacy and ultimate inability to step into human conversation. “The persistence of poetic attention during composition is akin to the translator’s attention to the original, all the while she performs upon it a delicate and dangerous transformation. Our epistemological dilemma is not resolved, but ritualized and explored.”¹⁸⁹

3.3 Commissioning new work for the Greenest City Conversations

This discussion establishes an essential framework for encountering Don McKay as a poet. In his work there is a commitment to an aspect of our realities that lies beyond language yet within the realm of experience. We are alerted to this aspect through the workings of metaphor. We reconcile ourselves to it through poetic attention, and illustrate both its presence and ultimate absence through a “healthy sense of the rifts of translation” when putting words to experience.¹⁹⁰ In this, “poetry returns from the business of naming with listening folded inside of it.”¹⁹¹ The conversation is as two-way as possible, an attempt to both say and hear in the linguistic act. “Poetry is the infection of articulation by the wilderness it normally feeds on and ignores.”¹⁹² In other words, wilderness is what necessitates the Heideggerian distinction between language as art and language as tool in that it lets to ‘earth’ creep into the ‘world’ rather than the usual way of our ‘worlds’ colonizing the potential for ‘earth’.

¹⁸⁶ McKay, 2002. 26.

¹⁸⁷ McKay, 2002. 30.

¹⁸⁸ McKay, 2002. 87.

¹⁸⁹ McKay, 2002. 29.

¹⁹⁰ McKay, 2002. 68.

¹⁹¹ McKay, 2002. 66.

¹⁹² McKay, 2002. 67.

The relevance of this to a public engagement project on sustainability may not be entirely apparent, and yet it could not be more direct. At its broadest level, the Greenest City Conversations (GCC) can be thought of as a multidisciplinary effort to find our way out of Modernism. The preoccupation with replacing substantive approaches to sustainability with procedural ones is the abandoning of linear fact-based policy-making in favour of collective value-based conversations rooted in bracketing the epistemic, normative, and political authority of science. The other four channels of the GCC (mobile phone applications on transportation; table top games on sustainability; facebook dialogues transportation; and energy/urban density workshops) built very issue-based explorations of non-Modernist approaches to policy-making. In other words, how might collective, dialogical processes come to a decision on the nature of a particular sustainability challenge, i.e. transportation or urban density? The art channel eschewed the concreteness of any particular issue and attempted to engage the transition itself. How do we learn to live in a world without scientific authority, without redemptive truths? How might we come to understand the world as a procedural entity rather than a substantive one? New work from Don McKay went in search of metaphors for this non-Modern world.

3.3.1 Thingification: escaping the purgatory of trash

With his notion of thingification McKay fully commits to what he sees as the essential paradox of poetry, the use of language as testament to its inadequacy, speaking as an act of listening.¹⁹³ What could it mean to hear with words? To focus on this paradox as a potential source of an environmental ethic, McKay turns away from his usual fetishes of birds, rocks and other objects of recognizable wilderness. “With this [project], I thought I would approach objects that are between the wilderness condition and the domesticated condition. It tests an idea I’ve had, that wilderness is a category that exists in everything, and part of poetry’s project is to recover the wilderness latent in manufactured objects.”

This ‘recovering of wilderness’ I take to be the aim of that ‘listening-embedded’ speech of poetry—that paradoxical orientation towards experience rooted in the mechanics of metaphor. This gesture he names ‘thingification’: “If the modernist agenda has created objects out of things, can a different agenda create things out of objects?”¹⁹⁴ Where scientific rationality taught us to objectify, poetic attention seeks to *thingify*. “Are objects objects in perpetuity, whose only exit from objectivity is through the ample purgatory of trash?”¹⁹⁵ In other words, can things only exit the cages of our conceptual categorization via breakdown? Is collapse the territory’s only escape from the map? Is this material redemption the only way to reset the

¹⁹³ McKay, Interview, May 6, 2011; October 22, 2011.

¹⁹⁴ McKay Interview, May 6, 2011.

¹⁹⁵ McKay Interview, May 6, 2011.

relationship between human and world? Or is a conceptual redemption possible? Can we hear the struggling of an object and set it free from its category, its map, its ontology?

Such questions lie at the very heart of the sustainability challenge. We seem fairly certain that the environmental crisis can resolve itself via the purgatory of trash. Popular works like Jared Diamond's *Collapse* describe countless examples of over-stressed environments reaching tipping points and unloading themselves of their 'top fauna' in dramatic fashion. The purgatory of trash is a time-honoured reset button on ecological complexity and precisely what the sustainability challenge is hoping to avoid. Yet what Diamond's *Collapse* also details is the extraordinary difficulty complex societies seem to have in choosing a conceptual redemption over a material one.¹⁹⁶ In other words, human societies with the foresight to detect 'cracks in their foundations' may lack the reflexivity to diagnose them effectively, or may lack the capacity to orchestrate a sufficient response.

This supports the larger thesis at play here, that the sustainability challenge is as much an imaginative challenge as one of technology or policy. More specifically, Rorty's encouragement to abandon redemptive truths seems once again pertinent. For it is surely redemptive truths that dig themselves into the imaginative foundations of a culture such that its collapse is the only way to uproot them. Redemptive truths may have very little chance of revising themselves without McKay's purgatory of trash. A literary culture, one explicitly lacking redemptive truth, can perhaps edit its narrative more readily, not just because it lacks internalized instructions not to do so, but because it possesses the official mandate to seek out precisely such opportunities.

Thus McKay's question, whether objects can exit objectivity in some way other than the purgatory of trash, is a sub-heading to that larger question of whether our society can do so as well. His strategy, to find a language with which one can listen as well as speak, is the effort to *thingify* rather than objectify, to offer descriptions, categorizations, possible integrations, and to be attentive to the continued response of entities from within those descriptions. This approach to mapping the dynamic terrain of our realities is one that would depend on the kind of paradoxical stance McKay is attempting to cultivate here, listening with language.

The difficulty, of course, is that relating to anything in this way implies endless ferrying back and forth across the boundary separating subject (poet) from object (bird). Every statement becomes proposition, every ontology, a collaborative exploration. Do we know how to be in the world in this way? Constantly crossing back and forth between subject and object? Constantly checking our epistemic instincts, hedging our

¹⁹⁶ Jared Diamond. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. Viking. New York. 2005. 119-120. See also Ronald Wright. *A Short History of Progress*. Anansi. 2004.

ontological bets? And are we forever condemned to live in such borderlands, as surely only a poet or some other artist would be willing to do? McKay's answer is this: "If you cross a border enough, stopping to have tea with the border guard, the boundary stops being a boundary and starts being a room."¹⁹⁷

3.3.2 *Thingamajig*: conversations with stick, boots, and chair

'Thingamajig' is a new work from Don McKay in search of that room. It is a verse-prose piece in three sections, each starring what McKay refers to as a different 'hero' (walking stick, work boots and rocking chair) and preceded by what he terms 'pithy remarks'—short, dense statements on the nature of 'thingifying'. The work begins with a definition of things as dynamic entities, McKay's effort to move 'thing' from noun to verb: "There are many intersections in the ways of ongoing flux, places of steady but impermanent homeostasis. These are called things."¹⁹⁸ To bolster this account, McKay turns to old English, "thing: an assembly, a gathering; Thingan: to invite, to address." He distinguishes object and thing as follows: "An object is a thing which has been removed from its party line of rhizomes, hyphae, and roots, and treated to public scrutiny – framed, analyzed, experimented upon, known. An object is a thing under surveillance."

In order to map our world conceptually, in order to grasp entities from the limited human perspective, we have no choice but to limit them, pulling them out of dense, dynamic networks and identifying them with particular features occurring at particular times in response to particular interactions. The ability of the entity to 'speak' beyond this conceptualization is greatly reduced. "Something is lost, when a thing is made into an object," says McKay, "we mourn the lost thing, even as we pursue the inescapable work of objectification." And then, in Latin, the language of Western civilization and of scientific nomenclature, the language we used to rationalize the world, McKay writes "Homo faber tristis" ('Man the sad-maker'). We enter *Thingamajig* heavy of heart, stuck between our 'inescapable work' and a new acquaintance with its cost.

3.3.2.1 *stick*

The first hero of the triptych is McKay's walking stick.¹⁹⁹ This section is made up of three poems and a prose piece, all exploring the relationship between subject and object, or person and thing, in two contrasting modes, action and repose. This distinction subtly illustrates the relevance of context to ontology. In action the boundary between body and stick compresses. The feel of its grip unforgettable to McKay's palm,

Nor will my arm and shoulder

¹⁹⁷ McKay Interview, May 6, 2011.

¹⁹⁸ All subsequent quotes from "Thingamajig" are found in Don McKay. in *Paradoxides*. McClelland and Stewart. Toronto. 2012.

¹⁹⁹ Normally I would follow custom and refer to the speaker of the text as 'the speaker', but the essence of these works is explicitly autobiographical.

lose the slight give you gave –

This intertwining of body and stick marked the beginning of their relationship, with McKay's knee going out mid-hike, necessitating the extra limb. "It wasn't that I quit limping, more like the limp had someone it could talk to." Hints of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* echo throughout, first in the way the stick leans towards humanness:

as though you'd paused,
Musing, en route from wood to muscle
Or vice versa

And second in the way McKay leans towards mechanism:

On a steep ascent
we made ourselves machinery,
plant and hoick, plant and hoick

In their functioning capacities as hiker and stick, says McKay, "we were like that, closer than what's-his-name and Rin Tin Tin."

Outside of the window of action, once still, a quiet distance settles between them. On a break somewhere on a trail, they sit, off to themselves, McKay musing at the inner mental life of the stick.

Off-duty, you'd lean on a trunk,
no doubt recalling an illustrious forbear –
the alpenstock, the crook,
the lever that could lift the world,
or the rod that smote the rock
to make the water flow -
while I regathered breath, reread the map
and drank.

A poet musing upon a stick's musing at the great sticks of history. The image is humorous enough to expose its pursuit of the inner subjectivity of the thing as a grasping gesture. The amusing imagery that keeps us safe from assuming we can know the inner life of a stick. The point is to conjecture, and in doing so leave a placeholder for wilderness, halting us from any totalizing view.

This demonstrates at once an intimacy between the two subjects and yet a hopeless distance. One can reach across this difference, but not erase it. We have the intimacy:

Here's to us -
I raise my coffee cup –
here's to the brotherhood of sticks and bones.

And the insoluble divide:

And for these gifts of difference and distance
and the *realpolitik* of use,
you may curse us or bless us or both.

The contrast of these lines show the leaning into similarity, into knowing, alongside the ultimate unknowability of genuine otherness.

3.3.2.2 *boots*

Like a bum knee, it is further human frailty that makes a hero of the next item in the triptych as well. At first, this is simply a physical frailty. “Who will sustain these frail splayed assemblages” of human feet, “poking their little ways into the future?”

Ah,
let there be boots.

The line echoes biblically. And like the ancient evocation it resembles, it too signals the creation of a new world: “May there be eros in our entries,” says McKay, of both foot into boot and more so, man into world. From the tender, tentative “toes like droll noses”, once laced into a pair of boots, he cries

- *andiamo!* -
out the door and up the ridge.

The world, we are left without doubt, is about to be taken in stride as these things, these tools, transform their owner physically, but more so, existentially as well.

This is explicit in the prose that follows. Here the agency of the boots to make the man emerges as a coming of age tale. Young men in a work camp, new owners of boots, fresh “out of the silly sneakers of youth,” grease the leather uppers with dubbin. The sexual overtones are explicit—“the absence of girlfriends”, “second base with his boots”. Although the activity is not purely hormonal, “probably we were also trying to

make our boots look more worn than they really were, disguising their lack of nicks and scratches...Each time I pulled mine on, I immediately wanted to live up to them.”

This relationship between the young men and their new boots illustrates how deeply our identities blend with our objects, how strong a claim our stuff makes on our selves. The intensity of this claim I find often alarming. I recall as a child watching my older sister caught in the frenzied need for Cabbage Patch Dolls in the mid-1980s and being confused, what are the features of the doll that make it impossible not to have? My own experience came later as part of an alpine ski team racing together in the spring and the desperate need I felt for a particular pair of sunglasses! It remains a struggle to articulate how potent the agency of such a marginal item felt, not as something I needed to have but something I needed to be. I had skies, poles, and boots, even an identical matching suit to my peers. I could participate in every activity fully. Yet only these sunglasses would allow me to pass into the centre of the experience, to allow the agency of this world to take me into its grasp.

Anthropologist Dorothy Holland explores this issue in her work *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. The social space of an adolescent cohort spring skiing or a group of young men in a logging camp is case of what Holland refers to as a ‘Figured World’. These socially realized worlds are more localized than the more encompassing ‘everywhere’ cultural worlds, says Holland, and they operate on a scale where individual actors have greater capacity to shape and participate in the immediacy of languages, meanings, positionings, power, etc.²⁰⁰

But sunglasses? A cabbage patch doll? A pair of boots? In exploring how we establish and enter figured worlds, and, in particular, the role artifacts play, Holland turns to Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky.

Vygotsky gave central place to collectively developed signs and symbols as the media by which children’s mental and emotional faculties were culturally formed. He paid special attention to the role of tangible objects, made collectively into artifacts by the attribution of meaning...Through habitual use these cultural tools become resources available for personal use, mnemonics of the activities they facilitate, and finally constitutive of thought, emotion, and behaviour.²⁰¹

A young Don McKay rubbing dubbin into his boots is almost performative of this ‘attribution of meaning to a tangible object’. Such a process turns these items into what Vygotsky calls a “pivot”. As Holland says, “a mediating or symbolic device that the child uses not just to organize a particular response but to pivot or shift

²⁰⁰Dorothy Holland, et al. *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1998. 39.

²⁰¹ Holland, 1998. 50.

into the frame of a different world.”²⁰² Thus our things become gatekeepers of sorts, able to grant or deny access to the worlds they symbolize and the beings we might become once inside.²⁰³

And yet, just as objects hang on to their thingishness despite our best efforts, or in McKay’s framing, just as things never lose their wilderness completely, the same goes for us.

After supper we’d spend long minutes sitting on the steps getting our boots back on, amicably arguing. Would we paddle up the creek to check on the beaver dam, or walk to the tavern in town? Each option plump with possibility, the birches reflected in the lake, the laces snubbed up tight, the Shadow just a shadow swelling under the trees.

This closing passage seems to add so little, contrasting a bar with a beaver dam, weighing options for a random evening. These are young men ready for action, for work, for the world, and yet, as that last throwaway line catches, still attentive to mystery, innocence and the undefined. Their own wilderness persisting. For why tell us that the shadow is only a shadow if your boots are already laced up tight?

3.3.2.3 *rocking chair*

The pithy remarks before the last section pull no punches:

Phenomenology is one name for the path back from the object to the thing, the counterbalance to objectification, or “progress”. Poetry is another.

Rather than treading the one-way street of progress mythology, we may place ourselves on a ferry whose name alters each time it changes direction. On the outbound voyage it might be known as “Boldly Go” or “Cogito”; on the return “Mysterium” or “Francis Ponge” or “Nostos”.

These opening lines echo McKay’s continued insistence on the necessity of going in both directions, out into our objectifications, and back into mystery, wondering, longing. His effort as a poet and thinker remains fixated on expanding that space at the border, finding the view of the world that is built not from one direction or the other, but from the constant back and forth.

²⁰² Holland, 1998. 50.

²⁰³ The connection to the world of advertising and consumerism is obvious and ominous here. Little wonder that the largest employer of psychologists (Vygotsky’s profession) is the advertising industry. It seems one could look at the majority of advertising strategies as efforts to create Vygotskian pivots out of products.

The final hero of *Thingamajig* is an old rocking chair, and fittingly the fixation lies with its action. The back and forth that surfaced in *Boots* becomes fetish now, an obsessive ‘to-and-froing’ at every scale. In this regard, the rocking chair becomes something of a crude mechanism built to embody and cultivate the larger epistemological orientation McKay has been seeking. With every rock back and forth, we perform our dichotomies: ‘subject-object, culture-nature, self-world, feel-think, analyze-experience, say-hear.’ It is, as far as the semiotics of chair design is concerned, the model most open to ambivalence, ambiguity, dynamism, and flux. Our best chance at feeling ‘thingish’ about the world.

There are two poems in this section, the first of which seems almost like a small hesitation. Despite constant advocacy for back and forthing, a play on ‘rocking’ leads McKay to imagine such events at a geological scale. “Please don’t,” he says. “Be reliable St. Peter ... not havocking spasmodic Loki.” Is there more to this than fear of earthquakes? St. Peter, the rock, the foundation of Rome from which grew Western civilization and the efforts to secure the world, versus Loki, the pagan trickster, an icon of metaphor himself? Is McKay getting cold feet? Or simply suggesting, that despite his advocacy of destabilizing the totalizing, world-securing act of language, there are appropriate scales for such destabilizations?

let us dole you out in small
homeopathic doses fit to lull
our infant to sleep,
our old folks into memories.

Is rocking back and forth something that belongs only at the scale of individual experience? How far should we read into this nervousness at the scaling up of ‘to and fro’? We are left to wonder.

If McKay maintains that ‘to and fro’ is vital to being in the world, he is unconcerned with making it seem easy as he addresses his own chair directly. “And what about the to’s and fro’s of this one...?” It is rickety and old, with nails poking up, a pronounced slouch, “it’s an invitation that’s a dare.” Where will its rocking take you? “*Hang on and hope.*”

McKay offers an image of his ‘border crossing that becomes a room’ in the blurring of the back and forth that carries us into the world, and then back out of it:

you ride that corpse-road, borne
in your coffin up the ridge
and over, hearing your pallbearers’ groans
blend with your mother’s as she
bore you in the opposite direction.

One can hardly help but think of Beckett's comparable phrase, "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more."²⁰⁴

It would be wrong to blame the gnarled old chair for inspiring such an ominous view of existence without knowing its history first. This withered chair, we learn, had been a helpless pawn in the efforts of various owners trying to navigate that vexed nature-culture dilemma. Originally, the chair wore its naturalness in the form of hand-painted scenery from the boreal bush, rivers, fishermen, bears, moose, and geese. A naturalness we explicitly created. But these painted scenes were erased while it was on loan to some well-meaning friends who sought *to portray* the naturalness of the chair by stripping it down to the wood's grain—an effort, as McKay puts it, to "rescue pure form/from deplorable bad taste." In distress at the lost images, McKay banishes the chair to the back porch, that liminal space between outdoors and indoors, nature and culture. Decades later, he relents and goes out to find the chair covered in a fungus that had colonized it during its exile. Taking a sander strips the chair down once again, this time removing perhaps the most 'natural' appropriation it had received thus far. Finally, McKay attempts to restore his relationship with it by writing a poem with the chair as muse, a very 'cultural' appropriation.

In this strange lineage we behold the incoherence of the nature-culture divide in the shifting estimations of what represents 'natural', hauling the chair back and forth. But how to absolve these clumsy attempts to simultaneously bring the object closer to our lives (decorative paintings, sanded finish, tribute poems) while at the same time rendering it exotic (wild bush, pure form, muse)? Again, the answer for McKay is simple. Rather than lurch towards any particular destination, trying to find and insist on a particular symbol of nature to suit the cultural proclivities of the day, let us renounce destinations and assume 'to and fro' as the essential disposition.

Let our rocking also summon
And forgive them²⁰⁵, and myself

One almost gets the sense of the chair as a treadmill or stairclimber, though instead of enhancing our cardiovascular capacity, it exercises our capacity for ambiguity. Rock back and forth, in matters bigger and smaller than chairs, where degrees of destructiveness and creativeness are, if not necessary, inevitable, though perhaps less damaging when we build our worlds accordingly, with the capacity to rock back and forth built

²⁰⁴ Samuel Beckett. *Waiting for Godot*. London: Faber and Faber, [1956] (1988). p 89.

²⁰⁵ The chair's previous owners.

in (i.e. without redemptive truth). Thus McKay's to and fro incubates a kind of epistemic and ontological humility, eschewing rigid certainties for the knowledge that 'to' will always follow 'fro'.

By the last stanza of the poem subject and object, rocker and chair, have blurred together seamlessly:

So now to rock once more
calling forth, with our companionable creaks
whatever might be on our mind

Here, chair and thinker, creak and thought, collaborative to conjure what is on "our mind." Thought is a good three-eighths chair by now, a blend of idea and creak. McKay's use of the chair as emblem of the grand epistemic and ontological irresolvabilities of being human yield an appropriately unwieldy entity:

... it's actually a bugger to pick up.
A god can't do it

Even a god cannot reach his arms around the fullness of this chair. As even a god cannot encompass the human dilemma of where and how to be in the world, "brimful of fullness though he is." For the chair is a good three-eighths thought by now as well.

And so the work to lift the chair out of earth and into world, out of wilderness and into meaning, falls to the poet.

Now and then a poet's deft
Recursive verse may coax
its absence into dance, its anguish
into recognition.

It is the poet, armed with metaphor, skilled in the art of poetic attention, who must rock back and forth alongside its being, move with it in search of words that both say and hear. The final image of the poem, and of *Thingamajig* in its entirety, is of the man who made the chair, Angus, standing with his "paintbrush in the air, deciding where to stick the moose."

Let's rock back there, and past it,
Up the trail to the clearing
Where he's pondering a large White Ash,
The saw already growling in his grip,
And in his head – rendered transparent

By our trance-like to and fro – door frames,
Paddles, firewood, and a fancy rocking chair.

Here we have a man painting himself into a painted rocking chair wherein he stands before a tree that he will cut into a rocking chair upon which he will paint a tree before which he will stand (*and cut into a rocking chair upon which he will paint a tree before which we will stand...*) The image echoes into wilderness, both the quasi-literal wilderness of the painting, trekking us deeper into bush one new rocking chair at a time, and of McKay's wilderness of the thing itself, echoing back, away from us, deeper into the irretrievable distances of the unknowable, irreducible earth.

3.4 Conjecture on the making of a metaphor

This discussion is an attempt to identify *Thingamajig's* 'thingifying' effects on three domestic objects. While it would seem hypocritical to excavate too much of the wilderness from these poems in the name of analytical enthusiasm, I think some useful work remains in linking the analysis to the larger theoretical framework of the research. For the sake of clarity (and perhaps irony) I've tried to illustrate this connection in a table. Column 1 lists the heroes and column 2 identifies who or what created them (noting the very different agencies involved). Columns 3-5 are linked, and heavily interpretive. First I try to identify what McKay's stance of poetic attention *may* have looked like. McKay has been clear about poetic attention as a stage in the poem's life, that wordless, un-possessing gaze. Can we infer something about that stage by working backwards from column 4, the metaphorical preoccupation of the piece? It's elusive and subjective, but some substantive link connects poetic attention, metaphorical action and wilderness and the table below is an attempt to recreate that link.

Perhaps it goes something like this: Poetic attention is how we orient ourselves towards the entity or experience, it is the quality of attention we bring. Metaphor is the fashioning of an instrument, a tool, turning poetic attention into a communicative gesture in the hope to hear with words. Wilderness is where the well-tuned metaphor leads. If metaphor hopes to hear with words, wilderness is what calls back. Lastly, 'thing' is what we return to the world with—yet not what the entity or experience returns to the world 'as', it is what we have thingified, known but in no way totalized by its representation. Or in McKay's language, named with listening built inside that naming.

Object	Maker	Poetic Attention (How we look)	Metaphor (What is pointing?)	Wilderness (What is it pointing to?)	Thing (What returns?)
<i>Stick</i>	Beaver / Tree	Through action – a new limb along for the hike	Metamorphosis: Brotherhood of stick and bone	A silence, a quiet that separates self and thing	Mystery, Agnostic companionship
<i>Boots</i>	Assembly line	Boots to <i>make</i> the man	Boots as girlfriends; Boots as work; Boots as man's garment	The tangled integration of self and stuff	Our stuff as anything but inanimate
<i>Chair</i>	Craftsman	action over object; verb over noun; process over thing; flux over stasis	Rocking as the endless toing and froing of life	To and Fro as the irreducible disposition we must inhabit, to and fro as ontological, as what something is	Chair as 'thing even a god cannot pick up' – the inextricable entanglement of culture and nature

Table 3.1 The above is an attempt to place McKay's three heroes into an imagined 'assembly line' where by the thing moves through McKay's poetic action towards his thingifying aspirations.

The stick was 'made' by a beaver and a tree, thus perhaps reducing the degree to which we can secure it semiotically, an important point made by the poem's self-conscious attempts to convert stick into compatriot (i.e. something that works in action, and fails in repose). Further distance is added by the fact that McKay's affinity with the stick is primarily physical, his body's knowing of the stick, such that it is almost a relationship the interpretive mind is excluded from. Thus it is perhaps not so surprising that despite an almost metamorphic closeness the wilderness beneath is quiet. McKay's musings ring openly, unanswered, whereas the provocations of the other objects received richer response. This leaves us with a thing whose wilderness, though much more present in the literal sense, feels far more aloof.

McKay's boots are the product of an assembly line, objects rolled out in some rationalized manufacturing process already as artifact of a world (blue collar labour). No wonder then that the poetic attention looks to the sense in which they 'make the man', where 'make' carries the sense of both 'to form' and 'to compel'. What hovers beneath the surface is an awareness of how deeply and intensely we are positioned and shaped by the artifacts of our worlds.

In the case of the rocking chair, its maker was an individual, a man named Angus, (named in the text). McKay's attentiveness lies in the rocking action of the chair. This motion becomes a recursive metaphor opening the wilderness of the mind-world relationship. The chair is 'thinged' into an emblem of this human pathos, the endless to and fro of being-in-the-world juxtaposed against the single, instantaneous to and fro of a life.

This analysis is one possible attempt to probe the relationship between McKay's thoughts about poetry, the works commissioned for this research, and the larger discussion around sustainability, Modernism, and the arts. It is an attempt to recreate (however erroneously) how the act of 'listening with language' *might* have gone. We come away with several ideas that form a direct response to the questions of representation in the non-modern world: *Metaphor* as a means of alerting us to a 'wilderness' beyond our categories allows us to experience the inevitably limited grasp of any conceptual framework, any particular notion of reality. This is a phenomenology of sorts for Heidegger's world/earth distinction, an illustration of Rorty's literary age. Metaphor also forces us to contend with reality as inextricable from our imaginative agency. It is, in other words, deeply subject dependent. Metaphor as a communicative device only works thanks to a 'shared experiencing' of something's reality beyond 'objective' accounts.

From metaphor, McKay derives several ideas and interpretive postures that help make sense of the ontological rift that opens up between a Modernist account of reality and a metaphorical one: *Wilderness* is a word that we can use to communicate the existence and presence of aspects of experience that lie beyond interpretive frameworks for any given reality, it is that which metaphor exposes; *Poetic Attention*, as we have seen, is McKay's means by which we can engage the world replete with its own wilderness; *The Paradox of Poetry*, or as McKay says, "using language to demonstrate the inadequacy of language" is the communicative act that wishes to remain attuned to the wilderness that surrounds us; and finally, *Thingification*, an intentional, redemptive act of returning wilderness or at least the space for wilderness to what we have habitually reduced to objects. This, I would suggest, offers a methodology for living in a floating world, a world requiring the interpretive acts of participating subjects, a world encouraged by its own conceptual inadequacies, and, therefore, a world always in need of new interpretive acts as to its nature.

3.5 Engaging *Thingamajig's* audience

This analysis is the result of reading a number of essays about McKay's work, conducting three lengthy interviews with the poet himself, and studying the poems in considerable depth. In trying to understand the poems as public art objects, a more typical reception of the work may be of interest. *Thingamajig* was presented to a nearly sold-out audience at the 2011 Vancouver Festival of Writers and Readers. Feedback from the event was collected through comment sheets filled out during the event, along with a youth blog (as part of the festival's outreach and audience development initiative), and several follow-up interviews with a half dozen participants in the weeks after the event took place. The event was unusual for a Writer's Festival event in that it featured Don McKay alone. The audience, therefore, was in attendance specifically for his

work and so I feel it is safe to assume them to be experienced readers of poetry, with a keen interest in nature poetry itself.

3.5.1 Written feedback: love as the unclasping of objectivity

The feedback from the comment sheets confirmed this, indicating a strong predilection for thinking about the relationship between humans and the planet.

Don has me thinking of dialogism – that quiet critique of materialist dialectics. Art is the filling of that space between us with the dialogue that shapes our truths (the ways we narrate our lives to ourselves). The elephants/the elegance, an exercise in defamiliarization?

Passages of this thoughtful quality were not unusual in the written feedback, demonstrating the depth and intensity of the audience this event attracts.

While such feedback feels as though the audience was expressing what they knew or felt already, a more responsive engagement to the work focused on the ‘thingifying’ gestures of the poems, immediately understood as containing an environmental ethic of sorts: “I think the distinction between thing and object is very useful to the whole conversation about sustainability.” *Thingification* seemed to be interpreted as a deep sense of care:

Don’s focus on individual, particular and unique things, that he cares for...seems to strike a blow against the enforced disposability of our consumer culture.

I have no hope for true “environmentalism” unless so many people can love a stick the way Don McKay does: we are talking about wonder and gratitude and love

Love is the crown of use: without it, all use becomes exploitation

These remarks are very compatible with the larger project of thingification, i.e. finding relationship with a thing that includes space for its wilderness, that welcomes its agency. If love and thingification are not immediately intuitive synonyms, certainly love and objectification are likely antonyms.

3.5.2 Poetry as epistemology: aiming the causal arrow

Yet do such remarks suggest the poems *caused* such conceptual awareness in the audience? Claiming as much would certainly indicate success for artistic agency. However, beyond over-determining the impact of the poems, forging such a linear causal relationship might overshadow a preoccupation of this research. Tracking more nuanced cause-effect relationships invites reflection on the nature of the commissioning process itself, while at the same time may calibrate audience feedback and its relationship to artistic agency more precisely.

Recall that this commission began with the theoretical argument that prioritized art as a space of exploration. It was an attempt to learn something about the long road out of Modernity via the aesthetic realm. McKay's approach to writing is consistent with this priority, where poetry results from a lengthy and deep engagement with larger contextual dynamics, ideas, imagery, events, etc. Poetic attention is a fundamentally responsive orientation towards the world. In this way the poem has the freedom to grow organically from within its own world. It is allowed to collect itself slowly, via a complex of agencies, instincts, techniques, and idioms, all collaborating in a deeply responsive manner as it heads towards an aesthetic offering. The resulting statement is made not by the instrumental ambitions of an agenda, but by the unpredictable dynamics of art. Thus the poetic gesture attempts to reconcile this complex of agencies and ideas described above, and rings true as measured by aesthetic effect, not behavioural cause. Art, in other words, needs to be a result before it can be a cause.

This is the creative path the commission was trying to preserve, the 'autonomy of process' as argued for in the preceding chapter. However, as stated, this research does not follow more extreme arguments for an outright autonomy of purpose as well (although many artists and art theorists do).²⁰⁶ The main 'conclusion' to that question of 'purpose' remains the results of the investigation into poetry's role in finding our way out of the conceptual and existential grip of Modernism: McKay's illustrations of the role of metaphor, wilderness, poetic attention, the paradox of poetry and processes of thingification. These outcomes reveal much about poetry's relevance to sustainability as we have already seen, and as will be taken up further in concluding discussions.

Thus, in dealing with audience feedback, it is important to mark the point from which a larger, less predictable conversation will resonate outwards, carrying these ideas well beyond the reach of this investigation. 'Thingamajig' is now published in the collection *Paradoxides* (2012) by McLelland and Stewart,

²⁰⁶ For Example painter Georg Baselitz: "The artist is not responsible to anyone. His social role is asocial; his only responsibility consists in an attitude to the work he does. There is no communication with any public whatsoever... It is the end product which counts, in my case, the picture." Quoted in Suzi Gablik's *The Nature of Beauty in Contemporary Art*. Available online at: www.ru.org/81gablik.html

Canada's largest publisher. The collection has won several prizes. McKay continues to read from the work nationally and internationally, as well as give presentations on the ideas behind the commission project. McKay is one of the most influential teachers, editors, and mentors to other poets in Canada. He and I followed up the October event with a presentation at an artist retreat during the summer of 2012 and a live show during the summer of 2013 that was filmed for web-based distribution. The point here is to identify some of the concrete means by which the ideas, images, metaphors, and arguments of 'Thingamajig' live and spread beyond the present analysis.

However, in engaging the impact of the work within the frame of the research, I encountered a certain frustration with tendency to slide back into causal expectations, 'what did this work make people do?' This might illustrate how tenacious instrumental expectations are, and how easy it is to regress into a didactic view of art. At the same time it is important to confess there *is* ambivalence to this issue, an underlying desire to find the best way to 'use' art. Keeping that 'use' on the right side of instrumentalism obviously requires constant vigilance, a theme that will persist throughout the remaining chapters.

In trying to grasp audience response, sweating the absence of an experimental framework that might generate the empirical data to isolate what a poem *caused* in its listener or reader may be unnecessary. My lack of experience in creating experimental procedures may dispose me to a certain suspicion but I find myself unconvinced by most of the attempts to isolate artistic experience as 'causal' in some way. Observing McKay's audience through informal discussions with them at the event, along with feedback forms and interviews, my sense is that a positively predisposed audience experienced a deepening of particular self-understandings through language and imagery. In a causal sense, poetry seems to have added colour and strength to what may have been marginal in the listener such that we experience self and world in such a way with greater clarity and purpose.

Yet even this claim is complicated by the thought that any artistic experience is social, even the solitary act of reading verse by a dead poet is communion with another human perspective. Add a large and somewhat exclusive gathering of similarly-minded people with a clear normative bent and the socialization this provides to self-understanding is surely as potent as any of McKay's metaphors. So rather than trying and make clean arguments for what art causes, I am more inclined to look for the kinds of things it nurtures and stabilizes. In other words, *Thingamajig* does not have to cause a disposition towards the non-human in this case. If it can describe such a disposition, offer rich metaphors to lend it articulation once it falls within the heart, and offer a positive social environment where such a disposition can be shared and socialized, then a larger 'instrumental' value of the approach cashes out, regardless of what linear causal arrows can be drawn from artwork to audience.

3.5.3 A little dose of causality: ‘Thingifying’ at home

However, this tentative characterization may seem too cautious in light of a blog that was written in response to the event. Here seventeen-year-old high school student Charmaine Li articulates a very concrete link between the poems and her larger outlook.

I’m not a gigantic fan of poetry - I usually scream “I don’t get this!” after five minutes of it in English class - but when Mr. McKay brought forward the life story of each of his Things, I got it. I understood the purpose of his poetry, to a certain extent at least, and this made me very happy.

It is hard not to find something deeply authentic in a response from a younger perspective, one not experienced in (or even positively disposed towards) the genre in question. If I was nervous that the rest of the audience was already too much ‘with’ McKay to gauge the impact of the experience, this perspective is just the opposite.

The thing I liked most about the event was the way Mr. McKay looked at his Things - the walking stick, the boots, and the rocking chair - as friends... I think looking at them as friends gives us another reason to respect our planet, which was the point of the discussion. Although I wasn't able to grasp the entire theory of Thingifying, I'm sure I'll be seeing my pillow, hole-puncher, and umbrella in different ways from now on.

Contrary to her response, it seems this blogger *did* grasp the entire theory of *Thingifying*. Here a new curiosity towards the banal objects of her immediate experience matches the instincts that McKay brought to the project precisely.

3.5.4 The paradox of McKay’s ‘listening with language’

Moving into more of an in-depth engagement with the works, two of the interview participants (hereafter referred to as Interview 1 and Interview 2) were quick to identify two related risks associated with thingification. The first of these was the fragile line separating subjectivity and the thingifying gesture from nostalgia and sentimentality, a way of using the item as a launch point for pure personal reflection—‘here I am with all my feelings’; the second was the danger of personification and anthropomorphism, seeing the item on purely human terms—‘here *it* is with all my feelings.’

For example, Interview 1 found McKay's thingifying efforts to be too cramped with nostalgia. "The poems were too particular, too fixated...I didn't know what the purpose was of fixating on something so concrete ... it felt claustrophobic." In McKay's effort to rescue a thing from an object, it was felt that something too private was established, and in this, the opportunity to experience the 'object' as a 'thing' failed to materialize.

The experience was just going along on his story with him to those places. I don't think [nostalgia] has to create the container for appreciating the object, and without it you experience the world *now*. Just relating to things as they are, rather than the story that comes along with them.

The frustration here is that appreciation is contingent on a personal history, something that risks two types of exclusion.

First, as experienced by Interview 1, there is the exclusion of the listener, who does not share the history and may not find someone else's history a sufficient point of engagement. In the interview, this exclusion was tied directly to a larger problem that often emerges in environmental movements: "I am tired of white people creating white solutions for white versions of environmentalism. Nostalgia is *so* that." Thingification that veers too close to nostalgia risks establishing value and meaning within narrow cultural and individual parameters. It should be noted that several other interview participants had the opposite experience. They found that the quality of attention McKay demonstrated through his notion of thingification was directly transferable to their own experience, their own items.

The second risk of nostalgia is that it compromises the agency of the object just as much as an objective view. This parallels McKay's own concerns about the unchecked sentimentalism of the Romantics. Here Interview 1 sought greater help from metaphor, the same device we saw McKay himself identify as a way of sounding the agency of the object. In this case, the expectation was set up by several older works from McKay which were read as an introduction to 'Thingamajig'. In 'Setting the Table', three portraits are drawn: "The fork, spoon, and knife. I loved that stuff that would give that twist, walk me towards something and then, *oh!*"

For Interview 1, that 'twist' was essential to holding excesses of nostalgia in check as it "calls me out of my own trip." In other words, metaphor, to be successful, needs the resonance of the object, needs its genuine participation, and can therefore push back against our descriptions, our histories, our sentimentalities. This point was echoed by a separate interview and adds clarity to the argument being made above:

One good test of any poet is, in my metaphors do I have the physical world, the sense world, doing things that I would never see it doing. So, 'the rain spiraling through the window.' Really? Drifted?

Maybe, pounded, streamed, ok, but spiraled? I better be darn sure that I am not imposing this. The difference between a good and bad poem. Where you impose on the natural world, activity, where you make the knife behave like a fork. And the knife says sorry buddy, that ain't me.

Thus, as characterized here, metaphor serves as some form of check and balance to our engagement with the world. Or as Interview 1 put it:

It tricks your brain. You go down that path, taking you one-way and then go 'HA! No, I wasn't going there, no no, you thought so...' Your brain goes Bump! It could be my cultural appreciation of liking to be stopped, I don't know. But I think that if we're going to use art to cultivate some bigger sense of our world, we need to be stopped. Our brains have to be stopped.

So the effort to retrieve the thing from the object, for one audience member at least, veered too close to losing the thing all over again, this time to a personal history. Where a quality of metaphor had pulled the character of the knife, fork and spoon into view in previous work, this was not communicated in an initial hearing of 'Thingamajig' for Interview 1.

The risk of losing the object all over again was described as "throwing the baby out with the bathwater" in Interview 2, conducted with published poet and colleague of McKay's, Sandy Shreve. The concern here lay with anthropomorphizing, approaching the non-human in terms of human forms, feelings and functions. "Don's approach is always going to contain our anthropomorphism, our subjectivity. It *has* to." Shreve's address of this problem is not a critique of the work, but of the problem itself. How do we return ourselves to the world? How do we include experience in our sense of reality? How do we communicate with the other? These questions lie at the heart of trying to retrieve our world and ourselves from aspirations of objectivity.

During the interview, Shreve read from her poem 'Heron in Sunlight', as it confronts this exact issue while watching a great blue heron at the water's edge. Just before these lines Shreve has been waxing poetic on the bird's posture and poise and then catches herself:

No doubt it is a practical stance you've taken -
The images we conjure, anthropomorphic, absurd.
Yet it's how we connect,
And who knows what avian images you've concocted for us?

In Shreve's musings the anthropomorphizing is explicit, an attempt at halting itself from throwing out the baby thanks to a self-awareness. The image drawn of the bird is less likely to be mistaken for the bird itself if it is self-consciously an image, one whose inadequacy is explicit. At the same time, the poet forgives herself as there are no other options. "It is how we connect." Yet herein lies the paradoxical circumstance for anyone else trying to hear the voice of the other. "There is the paradox, Don wanted to leave that impetus to control [the object] but in the effort to do that, he still...he still had to control it." In other words, the human effort to listen to the non-human always entails a linguistic, imaginative act.

Like McKay, Shreve reconciles this paradox by approaching the world with a sense of give and take, "in order to have a relationship, the thing has to be imbued with some kind of a dance." This dance, is the back and forth, the volunteering of imagery, and the constant listening for its continued resonance. For Shreve, "the most valuable thing [to these expressive gestures] might be to hang on to that uncertain part...The advantage of the uncertainty isn't to stop us from taking action, but to keep us checking when we do, is this still ok? Can we keep on this way?"

Even as Shreve digs a deeper anthropomorphic hole for herself, imagining the bird imagining her whilst being riddled by its own 'ornithomorphic' shortcomings, the hedge against the failings of this view is written into the larger understanding of the enterprise. With that we can enjoy ourselves, make our anthropomorphic gestures, sentimentalize the view at hand, but with minimal risk of a totalizing view. This was McKay's approach with the stick as we saw earlier, offering it an inner life, but without trying to sneak it in unnoticed, clearly delineating it as an anthropopathic gesture.

A third interview picks up this same paradox. However where Interview 1 found the imposition of subjective content excessive, and Interview 2 found it inevitable, Interview 3 sees it as essential, not just to the needs of ourselves as subjects in the world, but to the objects we encounter as well.

What has been largely assumed throughout this discussion is the basic structure of the sustainability problem this commission was attempting to address. Typically considered, sometime during the Enlightenment a shift occurs in our worldview as emerging scientific methodologies pursue objectivity by excluding human experience as meaningful to any notion of reality while at the same time anchoring that reality in absolute accounts. The sustainability crisis is often blamed on this transition yielding an environmental narrative where we must re-integrate what should never have come undone in the first place. Humans are intrinsically part of nature, and the false dichotomies of Modernism (subject-object, fact-value, culture-nature) are errors demanding redress.

Interview 3 offers a different take:

There was a moment back in the 14th century, when artists began painting in perspective. That wasn't there earlier. The question is, was that part of our experience that we ignored, or is it possible that it wasn't until then that we began experiencing that kind of perspective? And what is it that perspective does? It distances me from what I observe. We can talk about the possibility or the gift of distance - I am no longer wrapped up in [reality], no longer swimming, soaked in it, I am able to push it away and observe it.

Perspective in painting is often ascribed such agency in the change of human consciousness, but not always as a 'gift'. The account goes further:

I spent seventeen years of my life in the Waldorf School movement. One of the insights in child development is that around the age of nine, children go through the ninth year change where they push the world away as part of their development. Essentially the child feels that the world pushes them away. Thrown out. Are my parents really my parents? Are you really my Mom and Dad? But what happens is that I push the world away so I can come to myself as an independent human being. So this loss, I suggest, is really our declaration of independence. Independent from what? I don't know. Nature? The gods, however we understand them? A wider spiritual cradle that has carried us? The Garden of Eden?

Here the 'separation' between humans and their planet—what is usually viewed as an epistemologically-driven power move on the part of (Western) humanity (i.e. the scientific revolution in its so-called mastery of nature)—is instead viewed through the image of a basic stage in human development.

A: So we come towards independence, but cast out the world, the question is, can we re-integrate? But in a way that doesn't lead back to the Garden of Eden, that doesn't lead back to paradise. Paradise is gone. How do we find a new integration of ourselves? How do we return to our cosmic home as free human beings? It's the parable of the prodigal son, but I prefer to call it the parable of the prodigal younger brother. Because the prodigal son suggests he never should have left.

Q: And renaming it 'the Parable of the Younger Brother' suggests he had to?

A: Yeah, had every right to. In fact essential that he go.

Such a take on the sustainability narrative offers a story that is less condemnatory; one that not only forgives us for being curious, but also values what was gained along the way. This resonates strongly with McKay himself, as he has always sought the middle ground, a balance between our analytical purchase on the world, and our experiential engagement with it. Understanding humanity as a prodigal little brother, someone who had to go on this adventure, rather than Prometheus, who steals what should not belong to him, creates a very different kind of invitation to this process of reintegration, as it doesn't coat one side in guilt while shellacking the other in bucolic idealism.

"Out of this scientific consciousness, how do we find our way back?" asks Interview 3. How do we return to the world? How do we bridge our current state as scientifically-minded individualistic 'rationalists' with an imagined sense of ourselves as meaningfully woven into the phenomenal realm? This has been a central theme guiding the development of this inquiry, as we saw through arguments from Heidegger, Rorty, and Latour in preceding sections. To find it turn up here in response to the poetry is very satisfying. However, the answer he gave to his own question was not one I necessarily know how to interpret or explain, yet I don't want to dismiss it on those grounds: "I think that only in freedom and out of love can human beings find this path back." It is so interesting to note how often people responded to the challenges presented by McKay's reading with this word. 'Love' as the necessary response to the problems of thingifying one's world.

When pushed to further clarify what a reintegration consists of in his mind, the participant referred to a notion of 'intuitive thinking'—"both a radically 'I' activity and yet something more. And if I can observe that as an 'I' and 'not I' activity, I can come to myself as a spiritual human being." My sense of this response was that it lay close to the kind of hybrid activity that McKay's use of metaphor sought, where the image or thought is an attempt to both say (the 'I' activity) and hear (the 'not I' activity) at the same time. I attempted to clarify this point as follows:

Q: That strikes me as the space that Don was talking about regarding metaphor, both depends on the 'I' experiencing and the not. And the funny space he was trying to occupy with the poems' prosaic objects. Am I forcing that connection?

A: Not at all, not at all. I think that's what I found, that he artistically came to this recognition through this artistic path.

This kind of hybridity, where awareness or thought is both 'I' and 'not I', carries implications that bear on the recent discussions about nostalgic and anthropomorphic gestures towards the non-human. As Interview 3 says "In my subjectivity, I bring back to the object something that belongs to it, but that I first find in me. So

it's the paradox." This is a different take on the central paradox of this investigation, where to hear the voice of the other one has to speak first. For Shreve, such a paradox had to be held out as a limit, a caution, a reminder of the inadequacy of our connection to the non-human. In other words it is primarily epistemic, a problem for knowing the object. For Interview 3 the paradox is ontological, a problem for the object's being. "What Don's trying to bring back to the knife, is something that belongs to it."

In 'I/not-I' thinking something happens to our realities. Nouns give way to verbs, objects become processes, ontologies thaw into negotiations, suggestions, refutations, modifications, but never solid states.

How do I rediscover things as embodied activity, as activity held fast, so every noun begins life as a verb? Even in our language. Every thing in relationship is active, your chair is active, and when I sit on a chair I wake up that activity, and when I get up, the chair goes to sleep. I heard Don wrestling with this in 'Setting the Table' and I found another poem this morning, picked it out: "The windows are waterfalls in stasis..."

This moment further emphasizes the point made earlier about the effect of the poetry on the audience's perspective. Here again, what is clearly a prior instinct in the reader is given further clarity, further intentionality. The poetry seems to deepen a response to the world that was already somehow in place.

The poem this participant read to me as part of making sense of his experience was from *Camber*, a collected work of McKay's. It is called 'Meditation on Antique Glass':

This room, whose windows are waterfalls
in stasis, dreaming in one place, is wrong
for figuring out your income tax or poker.
Susceptibility
they say as they teach the light to cry
and introduce hard facts to their first
delicious tremors of metamorphosis:
susceptibility
as though the film were paused at the point of flashing back,
woozy with semiosis: *the rapids are gentle*,
they say, *drink me*. Wrong

for marking essays or making plans.²⁰⁷

This extended image helps signal what we have been trying to put our finger on, trying to imagine speaking with listening folded inside, describing while checking in, thinking that is ‘I’ and ‘not-I’. How does it feel to do that? What does the world look like when we do?

This passage offers a glimpse of such a place, ontologies in flux, windows as waterfalls in stasis. The image plays on our sense of glass as solid despite knowing it to be, by official accounts, liquid. Anyone who has seen windowpanes of antique glass can attest to this, as the bottoms of the panes are always thicker than the top. This metaphor is developed beautifully here, as the liquidity of the glass is revealed through its relationship with light, light’s means to tears. What are we seeing in this image? Light, liquid, window pane?

Little wonder then that a room lit by such windows is unsuitable for income tax, poker, marking essays or making plans. Unsuitable for anything that requires a final answer, a conclusive decision, a definitive account of what is. Here we slip from absolutism and objectivity and float alongside realities that both require and exceed us. In a line that is equally devastating and elegant, that evokes both the rupture of our claim on reality along with the ease that will follow, it is the light learning to cry in the liquid glass that introduces “hard facts to their first delicious tremors of metamorphosis.”

I suggest that we are amongst the hard facts introduced to our own mutability by this line. This is the world made of metaphor, this thinking that is ‘I’ and ‘not-I’. When we shift towards an awareness like that, we arrive at a place where we are indispensable to that reality, where experience weaves into ontology and the background sensation of flow keeps any description from taking on too much weight. This is living astride Heidegger’s world/earth rupture discussed earlier. The participant went on to locate it elsewhere in McKay’s writing:

A: Wonderful, wonderful. Don’s ability to capture the knife as an active reality. Which goes into another conversation, the next level, the particular perception, the particular understanding of what he observes. There is what I observe, and then there is the concept I bring to the observation to complete the observation.

Q: and without Don’s subjectivity that knife-ness is gone?

²⁰⁷ Don McKay. “Meditation on Antique Glass” from *Camber*. McClelland and Stewart. 2004. 143.

A: It wouldn't happen.

In this ontological resolution, we perceive our own implication in our realities and in doing so can no longer hold those realities to an absolute account. This is the point made earlier about metaphorical action in general, its testament to the necessity of subjective content. As we move from noun to verb, thing to process, the world begins to float, and having stripped ourselves of the ballast of objectivity, so do we.

This ontological resolution bears directly on questions of sustainability. If the environment is a collection of nouns whose ontologies are fixed, whose properties are stable, then preserving such an environment via absence is extremely tempting as it is already its own essence without us. As the interview participant went on to say,

One way of looking at the environmental movement is to say 'the big problem with the environment is us, and if we just disappeared everything would be fine.' And I want to suggest that it is exactly the opposite. For all we have done amiss, the earth needs us to be the earth. The evolving humanity is integral to the future of the earth.

This is, on the surface, an anthropocentric position to take, to understand humanity as a necessary 'completing agent' in the destiny of the planet. Yet in this account, where the paradox of needing to be the voice one is attempting to hear is resolved through an ontology of things as processes, that necessity of the human dimension is contingent upon our ability to move alongside our realities, negotiation, interpretation, an endless conjecturing with one's surroundings. So while the ontological resolution declares a human perspective necessary to its account of reality, it simultaneously eliminates the kind of anthropocentrism we rightfully worry about by removing any center to reality whatsoever. Centrisms become incoherent.

3.6 Two resolutions to McKay's paradox

This research began with a commission to use art as a means to explore ways out of Modernist conceptions of self and world. For McKay, this was most acute in the subject-object relations embedded in the problem of representation and the various Modernist, Romantic, and Post-modernist misfortunes that can befall the gesture. How do we as humans connect with the non-human while avoiding objectifying, sentimentalizing, or denying agency or even existence beyond linguistic gestures? For McKay, negotiating these hazards meant indulging each one to a limited degree: Rigorous analysis without absolutism, positioned subjectivity with a self-consciousness of its particularity, and a language that seeks to betray its own inadequacy.

McKay's tool for this work is metaphor. Metaphor benefits immensely from rigorous analytical engagement, yet its figurative quality demands an experiencing subjectivity while a linguistic structure built of a transgression of language (McKay's true/false simultaneity) undermines any totalizing effects. When metaphor is effective we gain a sense of something beyond analysis and language, what McKay calls *wilderness*, what Heidegger calls 'earth', the presence of aspects of an entity uncaptured by typical conceptual frameworks. Here we are confronted with both an inability to ever grasp anything completely along with a sense of having grasped *something*. Metaphor is the opportunity for the other to either entertain or resist our ovations. It insists we move alongside our realities, chasing the constantly emerging horizon with pliable and responsive provocation.

Such a sensitive and crafted use of language animates our experience in ways that lure our imaginations into new ways of conceiving of ourselves and our worlds. This was modestly apparent in the discussion with audience members following the event. McKay's approach to language and poetry as a gesture—his effort to listen with language—clearly resonated with his audience and at least in some cases provoked a reimagining of our relationship to the non-human.²⁰⁸ In the follow-up interviews I was actually surprised to find such a rigorous engagement with both the ideas themselves and the approach McKay had taken to them. That is to say, not only did the interviews reveal a profound awareness of what 'Thingifying' meant, but also a keen sense of the risk entailed by McKay's paradoxical attempt to 'listen with language'.

Interestingly, two of the interview candidates resolved this paradox in two different ways. One I am calling an 'epistemological resolution', where the attempt to hear the voice of the other is an inevitable epistemological conundrum of being human, that we can resolve through a kind of hedged engagement. In other words, accept the limitations and be careful about how much you think you know of the other. A second resolution I have identified as the ontological resolution. Here human input into the voice of the other is not only inevitable but desirable as it completes the 'ontological destiny' of the non-human. Remove the layer of the planet that is composed of human imaginings expressions and the place is incomplete. In the account given above, this approach may avoid some of the problems associated with anthropocentrism as here there is no centrism at all. A process-oriented instinct destabilizes reductive tendencies.

I find these differing resolutions compatible, perhaps even ideally so. The epistemological resolution makes room for the other, while the ontological resolution makes room for us. That is to say, the epistemological resolution demands attention to the essential subjectivity of the 'object' in an encounter, while the ontological resolution accepts our own subjectivity in that same encounter as not just unavoidable (what would still be

²⁰⁸ This was apparent in several feedback forms, the blog quoted above, and in several interviews not discussed here.

the epistemological resolution) but *desirable*, how we infiltrate our realities, and how they infiltrate us. In both cases responsiveness is the rule, and rigid categories are unwelcome. If we could manage to embed these resolutions to McKay's paradox, for both objects and subjects—them and us—might we avoid the purgatory of trash by reclaiming wilderness on both sides? These ideas will return in the concluding chapter in the form of a discussion of regenerative sustainability.

Chapter 4: *You Are Very Star*

4.1 From private to public: emergent interactivity in immersive, devised theatre

We have just seen the ideas of this commission project reflected in the discipline of poetry. Here McKay's approach to metaphor and wilderness reveal intriguing ways of undermining subject-object relations in practices of representation, a means of exposing the territories that live beneath our maps through his paradoxical 'using language to demonstrate its own inadequacy'. Turning from the typically intimate, private world of poetry to the public world of theatre, itself often given to spectacle, we might expect the commission themes to manifest rather differently.

In this chapter, Kevin Kerr and the Electric Company, seasoned practitioners of 'devised theatre' (to be defined shortly), engage key Modernist themes identified in the theoretical framework through theatre practices and idioms in several interrelated ways. As a fundamentally live art, the audience emerges as a central preoccupation, playing out Modernist subject-object dynamics through the long-standing idiom of theatre's 'fourth wall', the separation of art from audience, object from subject. Similar divisions inhabit the creative process as well, playwright to text, text to production, director to actor, etc. As we will see in a moment, over the course of their development, the Electric Company Theatre has sought to transgress these boundaries in a variety of ways.

Through the work commissioned by the GCC, the Electric Company intensifies these transgressions to a significant degree. The primary means by which such transgressions are sought rest first on emergent dynamics employed within their collaborative creation practices, replacing linear models of play development with highly interactive processes, something I refer to as 'procedural emergence'. More extremely, with this commission the Electric Company will also seek to transgress a more recalcitrant boundary separating art from audience by including the audience as an active participant in developing the work *as* they consume it, what I refer to as 'substantive emergence'. This chapter aims to come to terms with both the practical dimensions of this approach—how do they go about doing this?—along with the ontological dimensions of the work—what is it once they have done it?

4.2 Collaborative creators: The evolution of a devising company

The Electric Company, led by Governor-General laureate Kevin Kerr, met the themes of the commission in full stride. Since their inception in the mid-1990s, much of their work has been concerned with moving away

from linear, hierarchical creative processes in favour of collaborative, emergent scenarios. A brief history from their website reads:

The company was originally formed as a collective in 1996 by Siminovitch Prize-Winning director Kim Collier, David Hudgins, Jonathan Young and Governor General's Award-winning writer Kevin Kerr, who met while training at Vancouver's Studio 58.²⁰⁹ ... the company's methodology has evolved but the creative process remains highly collaborative; blurring traditional boundaries between playwright, director, dramaturgy and design.

Primarily through a series of lengthy interviews with Kevin Kerr, Kim Collier and David Hudgins, I've attempted to trace the early evolution of the Electric Company as they navigated their way out of modernist practices towards the 'blurry boundaries' that come with working in highly collaborative processes.²¹⁰

4.2.1 Where do plays come from?

While in his teens, Kevin Kerr's idea of 'where plays come from', was, as he says, "the traditional vision - writer alone with their thoughts, beginning to build a world on a page." Such a view evokes the Romantic ideal of the isolated genius transmitting the transcendent object to earth. Kerr was not naïve. The view of the written script as a solitary act and the singular source of theatrical work, Kerr claims, "is even now still pretty present, a lot of people hold that value quite closely."

From the beginning, however, Kerr's inspiration was far more collaborative in nature:

That beautiful, dizzying, joyful state of a language that is suddenly developed and understood, inside jokes, communal exploration, shared discovery, I think that was most appealing—that group effort to figure out the sharing of image and idea, the sum of the parts making something greater. And that idea of the welcoming, the inclusivity that seemed so present in the process.

Already in this recollection an appreciation for emergent dynamics is evident in two ways, the communal, shared discovering as a method in and of itself, and the moral, normative dimension enfolded in such an approach, that it makes recommendation for how to be in the world.

²⁰⁹ Langara College's conservatory training program in Vancouver, B.C.

²¹⁰ The four interviews with Kevin Kerr took place on May 4, 2011 (Progress Labs, Vancouver); November 23, 2011 (MacMillan Space Centre, Vancouver); January 24, 2012 (Progress Labs); and April 4, 2012 (Progress Labs). The interview with David Hudgins took place on March 6, 2012 (Studio 58, Langara College). The interview with Kim Collier took place on February 25, 2012 (telephone).

While studying at Studio 58²¹¹, Kerr and his eventual Electric Company colleagues would encounter collaborative creative techniques as a teaching method. Yet they would not be taken up in a pedagogical spirit.

Often [collaborative creation] was used as a tool to help people find their acting skills, but the by-product for me and for lots of people, including my [Electric Company] colleagues, was the sort of discovery that there was an incredible potency of telling stories and finding a story together, that collision point that built a whole new thing that nobody could have predicted.

Upon graduating from Studio 58, Kevin Kerr, Jonathan Young, David Hudgins and Kim Collier formed the Electric Company Theatre (ECT) ready to apply a commitment to collaborative creation and ride emergent dynamics towards the creation of new work for the professional world.

4.2.2 Immanence, interactivity, and an early need for structure

Initial attempts to apply the emergent dynamics that were so effective in short pedagogical exercises to the creation of professional work would be met with frustration. Immediately, important lessons about emergent interactivity come to light:

When the container is small enough, when the short form is closed enough, you have a higher chance that something coming out will be successful... If you try and blow that thing up all its flaws become obvious. Like an ant that is human sized, it collapses under its own weight. You can't scale up that process, it just doesn't work. We found that out on day one, we tried to create a play together. A one-act fringe show, 45 minutes. Two of our colleagues were late, so David and I sat together and thought, ok, what should we do to get going? We decided to do some contact improv. It became a great symbolic moment of having to throw out a lot of what we thought we knew. In school contact improv is a great thing to get you going, get juices flowing, create ideas. So David and I began, got moving around, tossing around, this, that, here and there, and then just... just ended up getting nowhere... flopping around on the floor like a couple of fish, and it was embarrassing, and awkward, and after about five minutes of waiting for this to go somewhere, we just said to each other... "we should stop this."

This anecdote is as revealing as it is humorous. As we will see, as the newly formed ECT takes these ideals of experimentation and learning into realities of practice, lessons of translation will be required as they figure out

²¹¹ A prominent conservatory program run out of Langara College, Vancouver, B.C.

how to situate them within larger practical idioms. Immediately the story of a company building work through interactive, collaborative processes becomes more nuanced than it had seemed.

The Electric Company certainly deserves its reputation for having cultivated a successful model of collaborative creation, the question is, what is this model and how does it work? For the most part, ECT productions emerge from a collaboration between different members, that is, no single playwright. Beyond this, however, they regularly incorporate the creative agency of several non-human factors as well. First and foremost, the performance site itself (Collier). While there are obvious differences between a human colleague and a physical space, the inclusion of a site's agency makes it a very similar collaborator. The common instinct here is to look for the story not in the internal workings of one's own mind, but outwards, in the interactions between agencies. In the case of a site, attuning oneself to the provocations of one's context, particulars of the space, physical properties, history, use, ideas and other possibilities that cling to it. "[Site] takes on an influential role, it shows up as a character for us, a kind of provocateur, it's asking us things, why here? Prove it, show me why the story belongs here, why we have to be here to see this" (Kerr). Treating the site as an active, communicative agent drives the creative inquiry by destabilizing prior instincts and furthering the unpredictability of the process.

A final ingredient that always seems to involve itself in new Electric Company productions is opportunity: "A proposal, a possibility, something from the outside has arrived and created a spark." Over the past fifteen years of Electric Company projects this has been any number of things, geneticists,²¹² the disabled community,²¹³ collaborations with other artists or companies²¹⁴ or even private sector tourism enterprises.²¹⁵ The influence of an outside opportunity is not unique to collaborative creation, as such, but their instinct to respond to it substantively, to create work around such external provocation perhaps is. As Jonathon Young says, "We've very much built the company on this sort of ability to be decisive and responsive."²¹⁶

Multiplying the creative agents in this way offers what Kerr calls a "thematic richness, there isn't one core question, but two, three, or four, or those questions come through from different angles." Collier describes this process with great enthusiasm:

²¹² Kate Braidwood. "The Electric Company". MFA Research Paper. Del'Arte International School of Physical Theatre. 2007. 32. Available online at http://www.electriccompanytheatre.com/attachments/044_Kate%20Braidwood%20-%20MFA%20Thesis%20-%20Electric%20Company%202008.pdf.

²¹³ Braidwood. 2007. 33.

²¹⁴ Braidwood. 2007. 30-32.

²¹⁵ Braidwood. 2007. 25.

²¹⁶ Braidwood. 2007. 10.

As you're moving forward there is always someone to help unravel, or push through the blocks as they come up, and together you move through terrain you wouldn't have found yourself in on your own, so that collaborative process leads you on a journey that you may not have found otherwise. Together you can complement each other's strengths. There can be a remarkable synergy, when you're in a room together and you're flowing, one idea leading to another, and another, it's a very exciting time!

Thus we have a creative process featuring multiple agencies, human and non-human, all with the ability to interrogate the product from different angles, layering questions on top of one another and driving the end result towards something that no one could have predicted at the outset and that could not have come from any single authorial voice.

What was apparent in the failed contact improv of the first moments of the Electric Company is the need for strategies to structure and stabilize the increased complexity that comes with these collaborative dynamics. This was something that would require ongoing effort, negotiating both creative challenges intrinsic to the work itself—coherence, focus, logic, structure, clarity, etc.—as well as organizational and professional practicalities such as development strategies, timelines, artistic burnout, creative autonomy, livelihood, remuneration and recognition.

Specific to the works themselves, Kerr identifies the need to find counterweights to the richness unlocked through collaborative approaches: Collaborative creation “always needs extra attention because it involves a lot of different intentions and wills ... it's always been one of the biggest parts of the challenge, that need to wrestle it down.” (Kerr) Collier agrees, “the more people you have in the room collaborating, the more structures you have to have in place for it to come to fruition.” More voices mean more structures, resulting in processes that are fairly inefficient. This was something they discovered developing their first production, *Brilliant* [1996]. “This got rewritten five times ... we have boxes and boxes of material created for that show.” Compared to later projects, says Collier, “that was a much more inefficient process, in terms of that journey of creating something together. Coming out of *Brilliant* we began working in a process that had more front-end outlining and strategy.”

This front-end strategizing Collier refers to as “table-work”: A collaborative effort to establish a guiding set of structural decisions for the project. After this structural framework has emerged, each artist “would get these assignments, go away and write”, later returning to a collaborative process where “those pieces would come under the microscope, get attacked, rewritten, notes would be given, scenes would get traded, etc.” (Kerr). The efficiency gain comes from collectively establishing a structure at the front end so the artists “couldn't go as wildly far afield... it was a way to stay together” (Collier).

What emerged in this process, according to Kerr, was a general view of the creative act as “a balance between ongoing assessment, structure, form—a very logical sort of thing—and then creating a space for associative dialogue that could turn into experiments if there was a clear agenda to the experiment.” In other words, an iterative dialogue between associative freedoms and structural frameworks. Interestingly, this wasn’t a view Kerr applied only to collaborative creation:

As I started discovering later as just a solo playwright, the process has many similar elements except you don’t have the other voices, the other things going on, but the idea of the constant back and forth between thinking in structural ways and mechanical ways, and thinking very associatively and being in a dreamlike state ... if you only focus on one the chances of the piece being successful are diminished. But if you’re able to keep toggling, keep responding, chances are you’ll find your way through it.

So the Electric Company realized fairly quickly the need to oscillate between ‘right and left brain’, dream and logic, association and structure, collectivity and autonomy. Structure was necessary to govern their projects in order to create space for the emergent, collaborative work while bounding that space in specific ways.

However, I found little consistency as to what that structure was from one project to the next. There didn’t appear to be any sort of evolution towards a formula of any kind, but rather, a flexible model seemed to emerge project by project, focusing on the curiosities and desires of the present work and only secondarily responding to the successes and frustrations of previous work.

For example, in 2002, the Electric Company announced in its newsletter that it would be moving away from such intensely collaborative models:

Each member will spearhead a new project in development. Each of the four new works will be lead by its creator through the early stages of research, development, and writing. When the piece has begun to ripen it will be further enhanced by the collective process, which will carry it through workshops and into production. (Electroscope, Nov. 2002 – 8).

So while the collaborative model is still present, it appears to occupy more of a backseat by 2002, something that might suggest a demotion of sorts. I asked Collier if that transition in 2002 signaled a retreat from earlier ideals. Her reply was “Maybe, but then we created *Tear the Curtain* collaboratively, and I wouldn’t say that was a return to a naïve process.” Indeed, *Tear the Curtain* was a recent undertaking (2010), in which they returned to emergent interactivity as the engendering process. As with previous work, such a return “created an

incredible amount of structural work to try and pull those elements towards each other again” (Collier). Given the critical acclaim and popularity of this work it is easy to see why they return to such processes.

Managing the collaborative element in their approach appears to be an ongoing negotiation, revealing a constantly shifting landscape that positions the emergent dynamic anywhere from the backseat to the driver’s seat. While always along for the ride, how much agency it is allotted is something the Electrics have learned to identify and structure upfront—the “terms of the agreement” in Collier’s words. This retains the dynamism of the collaborative approach, preserving the unpredictability of emergence, while minimizing its capacity to fatigue and frustrate. In other words, the various structures and strategies they put in place that seem contrary to the free spirit of collaborative creation, are rather the very means by which such an approach remains viable.

4.2.3 Collaborative models and the professional artist

However, collaborative approaches pose further challenge beyond the collective structures and strategies meant to stabilize the development process. There are personal and professional adjustments needed in order to make collaborative creation functional. First and foremost amongst these, according to Kerr, was the substantial matter of trust. “Realizing we were all on board, that we could give that kind of criticism, freely—not be scared to—and take it freely, that was the realization as to how we had to work.” Rather than a passive background condition, trust is something that requires ongoing cultivation. “It’s not like that was instantaneous and we’re good with it forever...it had to start with a big trust factor that needs nurturing all the time,” says Kerr.

This requires a pretty significant reorientation as artists within a Western, modernist tradition. Western art practices are typically ego-driven; the realization of one’s own creative vision and talents. These collaborative processes had to trump those instincts.

It’s a collective no matter what happens, and it requires the concerted effort of the group to pull it off. Even if it ended up being ‘ok, here’s the script’ at the end of the day and it was 100% written by Jonathan, you would never really identify it as so, the only way it could have happened is through the three or four part conversation.

Letting one’s creative output drift into a collaborative identity is extremely counterintuitive for artists within Western traditions. Even for someone as collaboratively minded as Kerr there is still a grappling with this issue. “I feel that too, that sense of ‘what is my body of work?’ what will help me feel my identity?”

And this is not just existential. “The pragmatic thing of making a living, there’s this dangling carrot out there [for playwrights],” says Kerr, “if you build something really good, it might retroactively pay off in a long run [many performances], or multiple productions, royalties, where you’re being paid for the intellectual property that you’re leasing out.” Working in collaborative processes leaves the question of remuneration and reward hanging: “that is very valid, yeah... there is a bit of a need to rethink that idea of ownership, how do you ascribe ownership when it comes out of a process that is not individually led?”

Nevertheless, despite the many challenges added to the already treacherous existence of a creative artist by this commitment to collaborative creation, the Electric Company continues to make it work. As we saw above, even when they spend several years constraining the collaborative element to pursue more personal visions, or prioritize efficiency for certain projects, they return to the collaborative model with all its extra headaches and the results are often sensational. Over a relatively short history, the Electric Company has taken up residence within Canada’s theatre world as one of the most innovative companies. Their work has won too many regional theatre awards to enumerate, along with the two most coveted national awards available to theatre, the Governor General’s award (Kerr), and the Siminovitch prize (Collier). Jonathan Young is one of the most accomplished, and sought-after actors in Canada, on both stage and screen. They enjoy the rare luxury of regularly touring large-scale productions nationally. Reviews for the shows include praise such as “words aren’t enough for the Electric Company” (Jon Kaplan, *NOW Toronto*); “The total effect, under Collier’s direction, is stunning” (Robert Cushman, *The National Post*).

4.3 Imagining the audience: a historical perspective

Tracing the evolution of the ECT with a focus on structuring and stabilizing the emergent dynamics that come with collaborative creative processes is essential to approaching the present commission. As discussed, collaborative creation, replete with emergent interactivity, developed into a compelling process for this group because of how much time and effort went into harnessing its benefits without suffering its costs. Preparatory table work, ‘left-brain’ structuring processes, a deep investment of trust amongst particular individuals, and significantly rethinking traditional professional expectations are just some of the accompanying strategies that stabilized this approach.

Turning to the commission from the Greenest City Conversations, this project began with three early ‘knowns’. First, the commission itself, provoking new work exploring ways in which subjectivity is implicated in the fashioning of its realities; second, ECT artistic director Kevin Kerr stood as the lead artist on the project; and third, the project inherited its site-specificity. (In order to deliver the GCC commission within

the necessary timeline and budget, the GCC commission got rolled into a prior commitment to create new work at the Vancouver Planetarium. As there was no substance to the Planetarium project other than to use the space, it was a happy coincidence).

The initial connection between theatre and the commission began with Kerr's identification of certain aspects of the modern theatre (mid- to late 19th century) as emblems or artifacts of the Modernist worldview. Recall that this worldview was marked by a growing separation, a growing distance between subject and object, viewer and world. For Kerr, the rise of the Modern theatre models this larger conceptual orientation quite closely. Kerr identifies the "journey to the Modern theatre as a gradual retraction of the thrust until it was tucked neatly behind the proscenium arch." This distancing of the audience from performance gives rise to what is commonly known as the "Fourth Wall", that imaginary divide separating audience from art.

Eventually with the birth of modern theatre, late Ibsen and Chekov, the design of the theatre moves towards picture painting, set design gets rooted in a three-dimensional realism, and the sense of the invisible fourth wall becomes a staple. Now no actor has any interaction with the audience, but we assemble in that awkward three-quarter angle delivering lines weirdly to this invisible wall.

The grip of this idiom is such that I admit I had never even thought about this three-quarter angle, it was so standard that it was invisible to me until Kerr pointed it out.

Given the commission's preoccupation with how a subject experiences the world, it follows that Kerr's early musings about the project focused on fundamental questions relating to audience:

What is theatre? Why do we do it? What does it do to us? Why are we in this process? How do we do it as an audience? What are we up to as we're trying to make meaning out of a story? That's one part of the equation, a self-conscious revisiting of the question, 'what's the nature of witnessing a story'?

In his own response to this, he began with a general baseline: "At some level everyone goes into a theatre at any time in history with a buy-in to an event. We're participating in something and part of that is a participation of imagination, investment into a story, saying, 'ok let's pretend'." Yet in *how* we pretend, Kerr implicates several curious factors.

The first of these was how much the audience identifies with the characters. In illustrating this point, Kerr skipped from Shakespeare (pre-modern) to Ibsen (modern) to reality TV: "In the pre-modern era, pre-Ibsen, most of the audience was watching people that were very unlike themselves." Here, literal identification was a

stretch. With Ibsen and the modern theatre, “there was an increasing fascination with the private lives of the middle class ...a voyeurism, an inside look into private comings and goings.” Overlaying this observation with Kerr’s earlier remark about the steadily rising Fourth Wall reveals an interesting paradox. As content grows nearer its display grows more remote. This is caricatured by Kerr’s last example of reality TV where we are no longer *portraying the similar* (an explicitly fictional, scripted display), but, ostensibly *observing the same*. At the same time, the fourth wall has become the screen, binding ‘the similar’ and ‘the removed’ in paradox.

4.3.1 Character and audience identification

This observation, that as the content grows nearer its presentation grows more remote, is consistent with another of Kerr’s ideas concerning theatre’s relationship to its audience: As a character’s similarity to its audience goes up, the opportunity for the audience to invest in that character goes *down*.

It is part of a long conversation about my relationship to style and period; a lot of the work I’ve done has often been stories set in another time. It’s that idea of giving space to the audience, within which you can work a little more ... if I am [watching] a show that is set in 2011, in some ways I feel I have an opportunity to shield myself a bit. If there is a character on stage that is a corporate lawyer ... that character could be here, in this audience. Whereas if I am in a piece set in a place and time that is removed, I know that I am not an inventor from Serbia, and I know that nobody else is either. So if nobody is, then we can all be. Nobody has authoritative claim. It enables a freedom for everyone to go into that world.

My interpretation of this idea is that the relationship Kerr seeks between his characters and their audience is not based on the particularities of occupation, or geography, or even gender or age, but rather on more universal human themes like love, fear, vulnerability, loneliness, ambition, jealousy, etc. Kerr’s insight is that a relationship with such universalities is impeded if the particularities are too specific, too easily possessed.

4.3.2 Giving an audience tools to use

This connects to his ideas around the relationship between ‘tools’ and audience in a theatrical context. Kerr identifies “a certain joy to being in an audience and being given a tool that you instantly get to put into practice.” Tools, in the case of ECT productions, might indeed be actual physical items, or they may be interpretive codes that enable the audience to decipher the experience:

If [a performer] demonstrates a muscular guy and reduces him to a walking figure, you in the audience have to learn a couple of steps, and you can think ‘ok, I get it’, and as I’m getting it, I am using it, and every time a variation on the theme occurs, I get a little bit of rapport by holding on to what I knew. So I can do all sorts of stuff that isn’t even being spoken, I’m just working on it. At the same time I feel like I’m being taken care of, I’m not on my own.

Providing the audience with tools, in the form of physical items or semiotic codes gives us something to do, it is an explicit moment of agency, where our brains go from ‘receive’ to ‘send’ as we actively engage the experience. In other words, it pulls the audience into that same collective, collaborative magic Kerr recalled from grade-eight drama class.²¹⁷

However, there is a need for caution when the tool becomes an actual physical item. An early idea that did not survive the preliminary development stage for this project was the desire to use smartphones as a way of fostering audience interaction. While this idea got cut, the dilemma surrounding it is informative. There were two ways in which Kerr was concerned about whether or not the smartphone would ‘work’. In a very literal sense some ‘application’ would need to be built, be functional, and people would have to know how to use it and have access to it. This established a set of practical barriers.

4.3.3 A Heideggerian distinction

The more interesting barrier might best be understood recalling Heidegger’s distinction between tools and art, where a tool is self-evident, pointing only to itself, its utility, purpose, function etc. The tool does not send the imagination into a space of possibility, it orients users to the task at hand, sealing them tightly into a particular world.²¹⁸ Art, however, while it does designate some specificity, always points to a larger incompleteness for Heidegger, a world beyond its reference, evoked but not overly defined by the experience it offers.²¹⁹

This helps frame Kerr’s concerns about tools in theatre: “When I am working teaching playwriting, there is this hard to define difference between a specificity that liberates an idea and a specificity that destroys an idea.” Kerr recalled an earlier Kim Collier project, *Molly Brolly*, that incorporated an umbrella. Throughout the performance, the umbrella kept shifting, becoming new things, pushing towards new possibilities, adding

²¹⁷ It may be worth noting that this identifies interactivity as it exists in traditional theatre idioms. As we move into a discussion of more explicitly immersive, interactive forms there are many who point out that interactivity is already deeply embedded in the traditional idiom. See for example the remarks from director Peter Brook cited by critic Michael Coveney: <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/you-me-bum-bum-train-one-on-one-theatre/#.UwZC0UjdW3A>

²¹⁸ Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hofstadter, trans. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. 44.

²¹⁹ Heidegger, 1975. 46.

depth to character, scene etc. “So that umbrella was specific but liberating,” says Kerr, “it kept transforming. But some objects on stage ... you bring out an IBM computer, it can only be an IBM computer, whatever you do to it, it can only do one thing.” And so this hesitation to use the smartphone was out of a concern that it would always remain a smartphone, it would never transcend itself, and that we, in turn, would always remain smartphone users throughout the piece. Rather than us transforming the object into metaphor, we remain grounded by its self-evident specificity.

‘Particularity’ would remain a preoccupation of the GCC commission. Whether character, tool, or, as we shall see, the audience itself, Kerr’s overarching desire was to find ways to let things float free of their specificity, slip their categories, their objectifications, and enter a fluid space of interactivity and negotiation. David Hudgins who come on as director of the project recalls an early articulation of this basic idea:

I was thinking back to when Kevin first pitched the project, and how excited we were about the idea that the audience feels or gets involved in a way that feels like they’re participating not because they’re told to, but that it feels generous and the spirit is flowing between audience and performer. That’s lofty in a way, but how do you achieve it? It’s like saying ‘I want to make every one feel loved’ Well, great. But how do you do it?

Involvement, participation, generosity, and flow. These words characterize the faint glimpse of what they were after. While it might have been easier to aim for a more concise target setting out, it is perhaps endemic to the nature of this commission that something so amorphous was necessary. What ensued was a design process explicitly devised to feel its way towards whatever it was trying to become. From these initiating instincts, Kerr and Hudgins drew back to let an extraordinarily robust emergent dynamic begin its work.

4.3.4 Substantive emergence: writing *for* an audience vs. writing *with* an audience

This process began without any particular story, character or thematic material. The commission document, in so far as it provides content, was taken up as a preoccupation with theatre’s relationship to its audience. The project set its site on that traditional binary of audience/actors, subject/object, and imagined an effortless drift across this boundary, where nothing remains stable enough that one might cease inquiring of it. Perhaps we can hear McKay’s rocking chair creaking along from the preceding chapter, with only a slight translation to note here. McKay offered us ‘longing’ as the stabilized disposition from which to view the other openly, without snapping it into a rationalized account. Here I think Kerr is seeking the same space with the equivalent notion of generosity.

With these instincts in mind, Kerr set out to create a piece of theatre “where the audience has even more influence on [the work’s] future.” In one sense this might seem like more of that expanding circle of creative agencies, writer/collaborative team/site/opportunity and now the audience itself. However, what might seem in theory like a difference of degree, in practice became a stern difference of kind.

In past ECT projects, emergent interactions eventually closed down at deliberative decision points. Traditional processes of experimentation, reflection, critique, and revision were every bit as available as in traditional models, even if the agencies managing those processes had increased in number and complexity. I think of this as ‘procedural emergence’—the use of emergent dynamics at the level of process. Here the use of emergent dynamics is contained within an innovative ‘how’ directed towards producing a non-emergent, or fairly traditional ‘what’.²²⁰

The goal of creating work that remains open-ended, interactive, and ultimately emergent in its moment of consumption by an audience is a distinct agenda, one I think of as ‘substantive emergence’. Substantive emergence identifies the goal of *You Are Very Star*, where emergent dynamics are sought between audience and performance as the means by which that vague and faint vision Kerr and Hudgins shared at its outset might be realized. Where procedural emergence comes standard with Electric Company projects, substantive emergence is the new objective developed in response to the commission.

The difference, of course, is that a goal of substantive emergence feeds back into the challenges of managing procedural emergence developed over the course of the ECT’s evolution. The structuring logic, the left brain, analytical, critical work that ‘wrestled down’ the sprawling, dreaming, associative stuff of emergent interactivity can reach only so far into the construction of a work that features substantive emergence. This left Kerr with the idea of importing the iterative dynamic between associative work and structural work that normally resides safely within the creative process (procedural) into the final product (substantive). The goal was to create a work that featured a tension between chance and control, “a mixture of the wildness of space as well as that sense of ... the well crafted piece of art that the artist is responsible for.” Early thinking was preoccupied with balancing “the experience that the artist can’t control and the audience takes over” with “well-crafted” artistic moments of directed specificity: “The tough thing to grasp is how thin that thread can be. That membrane, between the absolutely individually driven moment and the absolute crafted, completed moment.”

²²⁰ This is not to ignore the whole discussion about an inevitably emergent dynamic of meaning-making that goes on between work and audience in traditional theatre, only to distinguish the traditional ‘what’ as work whose content is deliberated upon in the creative process and ultimately fixed by the time the curtain rises.

Kerr illustrates the difference:

I think about the Rorschach blot and the Robert Bateman cougar.²²¹ That is only ever going to be that cougar, and that is only going to be my imagination. What can I do that artistically has the, like it or hate it, the rigor, the well-madeness along with the complete freedom?

Can a theatrical work swing back and forth between the well-made moments of ‘cougar’ and the wildness of inkblot? Kerr does not want to abandon the crafted moments where vision and technique open the enchanted space that is theatre, but can such a work also accommodate the openness of emergent dynamics in the moment of performance? If previous Electric Company projects unearthed thematic richness through the unpredictability of emergent processes, does further richness await when extending interactivity to the audience? And is the best means of doing so trying to establish an iterative dynamic between the well-made and the open-ended? And what sort of metaphors for self and world arise in such processes?

4.4 Immersive theatre: when the wall came down...

This last question seems well-illustrated by the presently burgeoning subgenre of immersive, interactive theatre. In the words of critic Adam Green, “while an exact definition is still in flux, immersive theatre productions tend to operate in dynamically fluid settings, allowing the audience a more active, voyeuristic, and central role, while also individualizing their experiences.”²²² This genre situates its audience outside the safety of their theatre seats, immersing them in the site, rather than having the site viewed through the fourth wall.

The explosion of this approach has been explained by several theatre critics for how well it maps on to our increasingly interactive digital lives. As Green writes, “the broken-down walls of our world and what we can explore dovetails well with the broken-down walls of an artistic experience.” Perhaps an even more direct testament to this connection is the fact that the genre is being reviewed not just by theatre critics, but by the digital gaming world as well. A blog ranking the best games of 2011 included the darling production of immersive theatre, *Sleep No More*, calling it “the closest thing to a real life video game I’ve ever found”. Game blogger Dan Dickenson goes on to explain the addictive appeal of *Sleep No More* (some people have reported to have attended the expensive show *one hundred times*):

People who have played games for a significant length of time have certain behaviors become hard wired into their play style. If you grew up with Wolfenstein and Doom, you become accustomed to

²²¹ Canadian realist wildlife painter.

²²² Adam Green. “Immersive Theatre and the Freedom of Choice.” Available online at: <http://www.tcgcircle.org/2013/04/immersive-theatre/>

pressing on every wall, hoping for a secret passage to open. RPG addicts know to search every container in the hopes of finding something useful or interesting.²²³

So perhaps rather than being the ones *driving* instincts to a more interactive, implicated relationship between our subjectivity and our realities, the artistic world is trying to explore and heighten this digitally-provoked sense of self by pushing it off the screen and into our embodied encounters.

Interactive, immersive work has been evolving since the middle of the 20th century. For example, John Cage and the 'Happenings' of the 1960s explored a much more interactive relationship with their audience (see chapter 5, 'Music From Somewhere'). Like much of the art of its time, this came with a heavily normative, political agenda (for example, Cage's Happenings were meant to destabilize bourgeois identities enforced by concert ritual). More recently, art theorist Jacques Ranciere takes this idea further in a lecture *The Emancipated Spectator*:

Spectatorship is a bad thing. Being a spectator means looking at a spectacle. And looking is a bad thing, for two reasons. First, looking is deemed the opposite of knowing. It means standing before an appearance without knowing the conditions which produced that appearance or the reality that lies behind it. Second, looking is deemed the opposite of acting. He who looks at the spectacle remains motionless in his seat, lacking any power of intervention. Being a spectator means being passive. The spectator is separated from the capacity of knowing just as he is separated from the possibility of acting.²²⁴

Clearly for Ranciere, the politics of theatre enforce all kinds of dynamics of hierarchy, social control, power, and the passivity of the masses: "Theater in general is a bad thing, that it is the stage of illusion and passivity, which much be dismissed in favour of what it forbids: knowledge and action." (As an aside, it might be worth comparing levels of political engagement of theatre audiences with, say, sporting participants?) Regardless of the argument's possible merits, it reveals a trend in narrating immersive interactivity as a normative, democratizing act representing the liberation of the audience from social control.

How much the normative dimensions have fueled the explosion of this genre, and how much it stems from instincts cultivated by our increasingly digital environments is perhaps up to each person's cynicism to decide. Interestingly however, not long after the immersive genre has really begun to expand, critics are bemoaning it, as the critic for London's *The Guardian* writes:

²²³ Dan Dickenson. "Games of 2011". Available online at <http://vjarmy.com/archives/2011/12/games-of-2011-sleep-no-more.php>

²²⁴ Jacques Ranciere. "The Emancipated Spectator." Available online: <http://members.efn.org/~heroux/The-Emancipated-Spectator-.pdf>

If you've seen one too many “immersive” pieces of theatre, the shock and excitement of sharing a space with the actors can just simply wear off...I have the feeling that it is quite easy for the coinage of this type of theatre to get somewhat debased. What, on initial encounters, felt like an exciting, experimental trend can start to feel predictable and hackneyed...As we left the theatre, I found myself saying to my friend: “For god’s sake, bring back the fourth wall.”²²⁵

This article implies primarily an aesthetic critique and, as we all know, there is no accounting for taste. Yet author and theatre critic Michael Coveney is equally disillusioned:

I had been passed through a moshing, baying crowd, been shoved in a cupboard while “robbing” a sleeping woman (who woke up) and sent down a chute to a rubbish tip. My humiliation was completed at a karaoke bar where a gameshow host made me sing Johnny Cash’s “Ring of Fire” to a small, uninterested audience.

But he goes on to accuse the interactivity of posing an “illusion of empowerment”, ironically labeling the genre “low-level fascism.” Interactivity has become, at least in some instances, “bullying” and “coerciveness” according to Coveney, the opposite of its democratizing ideals, and surely a worse political metaphor than Ranciere’s oppressive soft-seaters. All of this is only to caution overly definite political symbolization. Surely theatre is variable enough to liberate a seated audience, and oppress one that gets to walk around.

4.4.1 *Sleep No More*: The paragon of the form

Beyond the shifting self-world instincts or the political, normative implications immersive theatre entails, it may also serve the present analysis of the ECT’s foray into the genre to look at what is by far the pinnacle of contemporary immersive theatre, *Sleep No More*. This production has been developing since 2003 arriving in its present form around 2011 at an unprecedented scale. The site is the fictional McKittrick Hotel constructed out of several warehouses, featuring over one hundred rooms spread over six floors. The audience enters the experience via an elevator ride. They are given masks and told “fortune favours the bold”. They are told to following the actors, open doors, open desks, wardrobes, letters, briefcases, anything that looks worth exploring. The elevator stops on one floor and the audience is separated randomly. Three hours later the work is over.

²²⁵ Charlotte Higgins. “Immersive Theatre – Tired and Hackneyed Already?”. The Guardian, June 2009. Available online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/charlottehigginsblog/2009/dec/07/theatre-punchdrunk>

I have interviewed several people who have attended the production, and read from a volume of blogs and testimonials online that is unprecedented for the world of life theatre. This production has a huge following, with some people claiming to have gone in excess of one hundred times. Chat rooms and write-ups compare the seemingly infinite different encounters and outline different strategies for navigating the experience. Some scenes seem to be attended by the full audience (400) whereas others feature what have become famous ‘one-on-ones’ where an actor grabs a single audience member for an intimate encounter.

There is no single nor typical storyline. Audience members are not steered through the experience but must make their own way. Each person chooses where to go, what to see, and how to see it. Arguably this latter feature might apply to any experience—we always see from within our own perspective—but this is even more the case with *Sleep No More* because all fragments of the sprawling narrative are delivered through movement and dance, there is no text (except those rumoured to be part of at least some of the ‘one-on-ones’). Hilton Als writing for the New Yorker makes a similar argument:

Because language is abandoned outside the lounge, we’re forced to imagine it, or to make narrative cohesion of events that are unfolding right before our eyes. We can only watch as the performers reduce theatre to its rudiments: bodies moving in space. Stripped of what we usually expect of a theatrical performance, we’re drawn more and more to the panic the piece incites, and the anxiety that keeps us moving from floor to floor.²²⁶

This is crucial to the larger commitment that the audience is building its own story. By removing all text, we are left only with the explanatory rhetoric of our experiencing minds.

Sleep No More is widely described as transformational. “I’ve felt theatre overwhelm me before, but until last Tuesday, I’ve never felt it pass through me... The show infects your dreams”²²⁷ Many audience members describe an exchange where someone asks them “how was it?” and they cannot describe the experience. Something is certainly happening inside the McKittrick Hotel. “Throughout the three hours you begin to morph into an Actor. *Sleep No More* in its truest form has the reputation of being something truly special, inexplicable even.”²²⁸

²²⁶ Hilton Als. “Shadow and Act: Shakespeare Without Words”. May, 2011. Available online at http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/theatre/2011/05/02/110502crth_theatre_als#ixzz1Qn34Fpqi

²²⁷ Scott Brown. “The Freakily Immersive Experience of Sleep No More.” May, 2011. Available online at: http://www.vulture.com/2011/04/theater_review_the_freakily_im.html

²²⁸ Leslie Horn. “Sleep No More: What it is like inside the world’s most interactive play.” June 2012. Available online at: <http://gizmodo.com/5912789/sleep-no-more-what-its-like-inside-the-worlds-most-interactive-play>

There are many detailed analyses attempting to pinpoint why this experience is so transformational. What is usually described are the infinite details with which this fictional world is constructed, how much the strange world convinces us of itself, (i.e. Kerr's 'well-madeness'), and how endless it is. A garden of forking paths opens up and audience members know they must build their own experience out of immense possibility. Not, however, the freedom to choose whatever they want, but to seek and find and interact. When people describe the powerful moments of the show it is when they have found something, or when something happens in response to what they did, where they went, who they followed. It is in the way the show responds to and rewards the decisions they have made. In other words, we feel our own agency based on how well it uncovers the agency of the other.²²⁹

4.5 *You Are Very Star* development process

4.5.1 Substantive emergence: resolving the inkblot-cougar problem

The tension between the well-madeness of *Sleep No More* and the freedom it enables maps onto Kerr's ambitions for the commissioned work. In order to cultivate that more explicit sense of audience interaction and agency, Kerr wanted to play with shifting perspectives for the audience, establishing for the audience "times you felt like you *were* the voice of the play or times you felt like you were *witnessing* the voice of the play or hearing about it." In order to accomplish this, Kerr broke the audience into three separate groups establishing three separate narrative lines. These lines would travel through different areas of the planetarium and occasionally intersect as a way of flipping between 'witnessing' and 'being'. They would become, in other words, characters in each other's stories. "The idea of the audience intersections, where you would at once see the image that the story demanded, but at the same time see yourself being seen in a similar image and not necessarily know how to understand it."

So the strategy for achieving this "inkblot-cougar" balance, that is, combining well-crafted theatre with genuine openness to audience interaction, was to establish a 'three-narrative' structure where the audience would follow one of the three lines, mostly independent of the other two. The 'keystone' moments for each narrative line were points of intersection with the other two. Here audience becomes character in another audience's experience. "That was our goal," said Hudgins, "that's what we set out to achieve." These intersection points formed the heart of the dialogue between the commission ideas and theatrical possibilities.

²²⁹ As I hope to show, this argument is relevant to the present chapter but perhaps even more to the forthcoming discussion of the music commission, chapter 5.

4.5.2 Procedural emergence: pushing collaborative creation to new heights

Crucially, this substantive emergence was pursued by just as hefty a commitment to procedural emergence via similar collaborative models as past projects. This began with an initial creative team made up of Kerr along with David Hudgins, who would direct the piece, work as dramaturge and eventually act in it as well (polyglotism he would later regret). The writing group that Kerr assembled combined himself with several new writers, Sarah Sharkey, a former student of Kerr's; Mitch Anderson, a science writer and board member of Electric Company; and Craig Erickson, a seasoned actor in the Vancouver theatre scene.

While collaborative writing processes are familiar to Kerr, working with three new writers caused initial uncertainty: "I wasn't totally sure as to how my collaborators would fare in this process because they were new to me...I thought I might have to write the whole thing, so I better be ready for that." Here we have the absence of a key part of ECT success, the trust and familiarity that existed within the original creative team. The three narrative lines were identified with three separate years, 1968, 1986 and 2035, "so that no matter where you go you are traveling outside your time." In a move that would have important repercussions throughout the development process, each line was assigned to a different writer, Erickson, 1968; Kerr, 1986; and Sharkey, 2035. Anderson contributed a scene towards the end of the show when all the lines came together.

Given the goal to foster interactions between the three lines and stage these interactions precisely within the complex physical space of the planetarium (so they could interact), the writing had to assume a very responsive posture. Rather than design responding to narrative, in many respects the roles were either reversed, where narrative had to cater to structural necessity, or at least assume an iterative, interactive relationship with other elements:

Creating in a collective model is not totally alien to Electric Company, where we're building concurrently narrative, staging, and design elements. But it is unorthodox to be putting it so much at the front end. It means we have a really big team on this show that are all engaged in a really active way to collectively invent.

Including design personnel, the creative team working at the front end to develop what would become known as *You Are Very Star* numbered over a dozen people.

4.5.3 Site-specificity: blackboxes and unpredictable agents

As usual, a key member of this team was the site. Though the relationship with the Planetarium began with an invitation from them to create work there, the ensuing collaboration between site and artists proved unhappy.

We felt a little bit blindsided. Because even when we went there the summer before, there had been a feeling of “oh this is great you guys.” The head honcho had said there are all kinds of possibilities for the planetarium and they would welcome interaction. I think he didn’t realize the kind of theatre we do (David Hudgins).

The difficulties were not with the physical space or technical staff, but the administration. For example, the plan to build a raised stage for the opening scene was met with what Hudgins’ described as “much negativity”:

That whole scene, there was back and forth on whether we could pull it off. It had to be designed by our designer, it had to be approved by an independent engineering firm, it had to get that stamp, and then the planetarium said ok we’ll do this. That was the only way they planetarium would accept it. So it was very back and forth, I staged a scene a certain way, and then was told we probably can’t have it, so we started rewriting. Those kind of things took a lot of time, going on a wild goose chase, then getting it, but getting it so late in the game, that all the other technical considerations [lacked adequate time to adjust].

So while a possibility for the site would provoke creative instincts in a particular direction, there were often lags as they waited to see whether that direction would be allowed. This halted any flow between site and team and left the technical dimensions inadequate time to realize ideas.

According to Hudgins, in many ways “the Planetarium was a big drag” on the process. I confess that when I read about earlier Electric Company projects, and the site was described as an active agent in the process, I never fully realized what this meant. I considered this agency as limited to its physical properties, its history, or narrative content, all things that ultimately are fairly passive attributes. The uncooperativeness of the Planetarium demonstrates much more directly what it means for a site to be an active agent, in this case via its bureaucratic tensions, security concerns, engineering requirements, liability issues, etc.

4.5.4 A true experiment

Before exploring how well *You Are Very Star* measured up to its larger ambitions, it is essential to remember that for Kerr and his team, this was a reconnaissance mission, an initial experiment feeling its way towards a larger creative glimpse outlined above. Just before it opened, I asked Kerr what it meant to get this show ‘right’.

For me, there’s a sense that the “rightness” will be hard to know until we can get there, and even then it will be a murky thing. What’s interesting is trying to ride the line between that process-product dichotomy, we’re frequently trying to acknowledge that we are in a process, longer than what is being shot for in this particular staging. And yet the end goal of the big process is almost impossible to envision because this phase is trying to test the basics of the elements, with the understanding that we may discover that the fundamental thesis statements were completely off the rails.

So while it is helpful to identify the larger hopes of *You Are Very Star*—a smooth blurring of subject-object binaries pursued through moments of interaction between audiences and narrative lines—it is important to keep in mind this was a small step exploring some of the very basic issues connected with that larger desire.

The difficulties of the experiment were layered. From a writing perspective, the goals of both procedural and substantive emergence prevent the writer from pursuing the development of material, ideas, themes, characters, or plot with a focused, responsive ear to their own internal logic, rhythms, pacing, inspiration, etc. From a rehearsal perspective, if the point of the project is to leave meaning as something that will emerge in its interaction with an audience, then there are important things about the show that become unrehearsable.

From a dramaturgical perspective, the substantive emergence sought through the three simultaneous narrative lines made even the most basic gesture of standing back and watching the thing impossible. “In past wrestling there’s a sense of being able to pull back and still see the whole, even at unfinished, broken stages, but I can never get far back to see the whole of this.” (Kerr). When I asked Hudgins what it was like to direct three simultaneous narrative lines at once, he replied: “That was horrible. That was a mistake. I should have come up with a different solution.”

The sheer degree of procedural emergence where writing, design, staging, lighting, effects etc. were all developing simultaneously made directing very difficult. Hudgins confessed that often he didn’t know what the play was about. Given that the director is in charge of clarity and meaning, it is little wonder Hudgins was at times struggling with such open-endedness:

I tried to write in one sentence what this play was about. I tried to show it to Kevin. And he said, 'yeah, that's probably right.' He wasn't as worried about it as I was, but I thought, 'Damn him for not being as worried!' But that's good, that's good that he's not, I wish I was less worried. It challenged me as a director, 'am I being too linear about this? Should I just let whatever happens happens, and let it manifest itself rather than trying to unite these stories through a central theme?'

Here the tension between the well-made and the open-ended exist in the development process with Hudgins' trying to occupy his role as director while trying to 'stay the course' in maintaining adequate space for open-endedness.

It is perhaps unsurprising then that much of Kerr's effort went to maintaining group commitment to the terms of the experiment:

The tricky thing is always hiding your own impulses to go to what you know. I found that emerging a lot in myself and my partners, and figuring out how to push through that into the scary stuff was hard. There's also the challenge of trying to be clear with the goals of the experiment, so everyone can be on the same page as to what we are trying to do, yet accept the fact that the outcomes are unknown. That level of uncertainty can be tough. My biggest fear was losing the group energy when we had too much confusion as to what we were trying to do. I was worried about morale crises.

Given such an experimental approach applied to such a large group, one would be sympathetic if the dynamic within such a development process grew increasingly tense, frustrating, and even a little testy as the performance date neared.

4.5.5 Emergent processes and the normative, instrumental advantage

An interview with lead actor Gina Chiarelli gives insight into the rehearsal process and reveals just how amorphous the project was. She joined the piece *two weeks* before opening as it was only then that her character (what became the main character) emerged in the narrative. Throughout this two-week period, furthermore, the script changed daily.

As we rehearsed new material that had been written, [the writers] would discuss afterwards, that we might need a little more about the relationship, the history of the character isn't strong enough, to support the scene, for example. Then it seemed like the writers would just get an idea, go home and

write and sometimes none of that stuff was used at all. We'd try it and then decide maybe not to use that storyline at all. From a writer's perspective it was a real commitment to making a huge contribution that wouldn't necessarily be used.

This wasn't any easier to deal with from an actor's perspective:

...things are changing everyday, you can't really learn your lines, you might try to learn your lines, but they might be changed tomorrow. An actor is always trying to get on top of the material but you never could with this, because it was evolving the entire time, right up to closing night. The last night the end monologue was quite new.

To add further difficulty, not only did the lines and scenes alter daily, but, as discussed above, even an overarching vision within which those scenes belonged remained aloof: "I didn't ever know what that vision was. I don't know if anybody did. I wonder if Kevin knew... I didn't really know where it was going or how it was translating. I think most of that remained a mystery."

One might be forgiven for being surprised to hear Chiarelli describe this experience as "extraordinary, one of the most enjoyable creative processes I've been through". She was glowing when she called the process "truly creative". One can hear in her remarks that spirit of generosity Kerr and Hudgins imagined at the outset of the project. This generosity and creativity was made available by what Chiarelli referred to as "a constant sense of 'what can we learn? Am I missing something you see here?'" A kind of humility inside the creativity." The openness to what might be possible, and the democratic spirit within which this was considered are significant transitions for a creative process, and clearly much appreciated by this seasoned actor.

When I asked Ms. Chiarelli what it was that made the process so delightful, she identified the leadership on the project, Kevin Kerr and David Hudgins, as providing that spirit. "[They] are such extraordinary human beings, generous, unafraid. They are not insecure in the way they interact with people and material, no need for 'I'm right and you're wrong, I am the authority here.'... If you don't have that in a process like this? It could be really abusive." The facilitation of a creative process that succeeded in establishing such a level of comfort is compelling. "If a kid walked in and had a question, Kevin would listen. Because he would think to himself, 'maybe I can learn something from you, maybe you have a good point. And I would be unwise not to open myself to an idea I might not have had.'"

This raises a larger theme that will be discussed in the concluding chapters, that is, the role of the expert. One of the vexing issues for emergent processes is how experts position themselves, in terms of the

characterization and distribution of knowledge and agency. To see such an accomplished, experienced director like Hudgins accept a very humbling struggle to find his place within the process is, as Chiarelli said, vital to the success of the process. If the product *You Are Very Star*, shouldn't happen to live up to those vague ideals stated at the outset— involvement, participation, generosity, and flow—the process certainly seems to have. It is a clear indication of Fiorino's arguments around the normative and instrumental advantages of working in collaborative, interactive, emergent ways. The substantive question, however, remains to be addressed...

4.6 *You Are Very Star* (brief synopsis)

Thus far, we've seen a rigorous commitment to emergent dynamics within the creative process, featuring a large collective team working in a deeply collaborative manner whilst fending off the temptation to streamline development processes in favour of fostering interactions between the parts. What emerged was a show built from three loosely interrelated stories that took place in three different times, 1968, 1986, and 2035. Each story was experienced by a different audience group, assigned to their particular storyline via an online selection process. Each group was met by a 'guide', a fictional character that would be leading their group through the story.

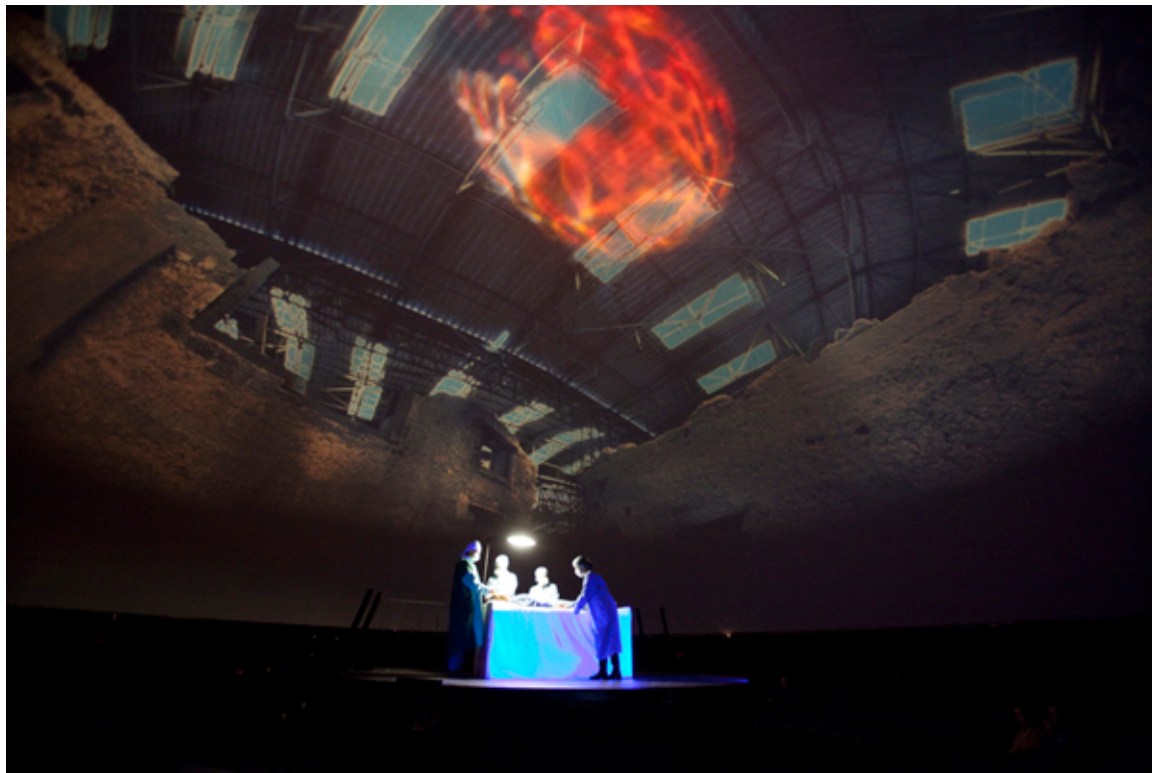


Figure 4.1 The opening scene of *You Are Very Star*, actress Gina Chiarelli lies on the hospital bed surrounded by the 'guides'. An image of her brain floats above the scene.

All three lines began together, sometime in the future where we met the main character lying on a hospital bed undergoing an operation. We were told she was a 'dream generator', and that we would be traveling to different parts of her consciousness that evening. Then each narrative wove its way through the Planetarium (hallways, atrium, lobby, stairwells, elevators, etc.) in mostly independent fashion

1968 went back to a story about a mother signing up for her daughter's poetry class in an effort to 'find herself'. Her professor, himself desperately 'lost' in life, offers delusional lectures that blend recent advances in space exploration with transcendent views of poetry. The daughter begs the mother to return to a more domestic role together with her father. How this develops is unclear, however we later witness the mother bringing a Christmas gift to the lonely professor towards the end.

1986 began with a solitary young girl preparing to compete in a science fair project against a high-powered overachieving young boy. Later this girl ends up in the care of an irresponsible babysitter who takes her downtown and abandons her there. In preparation to go outside, the audience had been instructed to don white suits. While the girl is panicking she catches sight of a woman from the future that has appeared to her in her dreams. We take off the suits leaving them out on the patio.

2035 was a futuristic 'instructional video' of an already-happened apocalypse. We are experiencing the flight of humans from earth. A young man working in a government department bumps into a fugitive female. Though suspicious of each other, they seem to cooperate. They meet again later at an office party where they plan to escape from the planet. Through the windows we see a group of people dressed in white suits preparing to do the same. The blinds go down. We hear a flurry of gunshots. When we look again the suits are empty, scattering in the wind.



Figure 4.2 An image of two separate audience lines coming together in mutually exclusive understandings.

I think it is fair to say that these brief sketches are of narrative lines that were themselves sketches. Each line was never fully fleshed out for this workshopped piece and instead had to cater to the structural experiment. The intersection between *1986* and *2035* gives a sense of how this was done.

The difficulty in analyzing this project is that it remained very much ‘in-progress’. Given how ambitious it was, with a development team of over a dozen people all collaboratively creating the piece in a fairly uncooperative site, and under time and budgetary constraints, there was much about this that was underdeveloped (recall that *Sleep No More* evolved over eight years and in its present form is said to have cost “millions”).²³⁰ What is difficult to assess about this particular project is whether such incompleteness was an artifact of the process, an inevitable outcome, or something that would realize itself over time.

4.7 Audience response: life beyond the wall...

Therefore, most critical engagement with this commission will center on the process itself. However, with some sixty qualitative surveys we can offer a sketch of the audience experience. First however, it might be useful to present a brief audience profile. Most arts events have a self-selecting audience, one that has chosen to go based on some investment, a prior relationship with the artists, or the genre, etc. For this show there were originally 180 tickets (60 per night). These tickets were taken immediately from people on the Electric

²³⁰ Erik Piepenberg. “Stage is set, ready for your part?”. New York Times. March 16, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/20/theater/sleep-no-more-from-punchdrunk-transforms-chelsea-warehouses.html?_r=0

Company mailing list. In other words, the entire audience was drawn from a faithful membership of Electric Company fans. A fourth performance was added to deal with extra demand, but again, the audience was drawn from people directly connected with the company and the project. While a publicity campaign was developed, it proved unnecessary. Posters, flyers, etc. all went undelivered thanks to the enthusiastic response. This indicates the kind of following the Electric Company enjoys in Vancouver, but also the kind of audience member involved in the production – experienced theatre-goers, with an appetite for progressive work and a high degree of allegiance to the company.

The following questions were asked about the performance:

1. What year did you experience?
2. Give a very brief description of some of the characters you encountered:
3. What do you recall from the narrative (actions, events, plot) of the line you saw?
4. Rate your engagement with the characters: Strong__Middling__Mild__
 - a. Comments:
5. Rate your engagement with the narrative: Strong__Middling__Mild__
 - a. Comments:
6. As you watched your storyline, other groups of audience members were simultaneously following their separate stories. How often were these other narrative lines in your mind during your experience? Never__Occasionally__Constantly__
 - a. Comments:
7. If there was an awareness of the other audience groups and stories, was it:
Distracting__Irrelevant__Intriguing__
 - a. Comments:
8. There were a number of moments where the different narrative lines and audience groups intersected. Can you describe any of these?
9. Are there any images or moments that you remember particularly well from your experience?
10. Please feel free add any further comments about your experience of *You Are Very Star*

Questions 2-5 deal with very basic elements of theatre, how engaged the audience was with narrative and character. Generally responses to questions 2 and 3 were fairly strong. Most respondents could identify the basic characters and narrative structure of the work and in many cases provide surprisingly detailed

descriptions. However, when asked to rate their own engagement with these elements, the results were mixed²³¹:

Engagement with...	mild	middling	strong
Character	%23	%48	%29
Narrative	%30	%52	%19

Table 4.1 Narrative and character engagement

The comments section was useful in providing further context to these rankings. For example, three responses (one from each narrative line) that all selected ‘middling’ left the following comments: “What we saw with those characters didn’t conclude when the play concluded. So there was no finale, no sense of satisfaction with them” (1968); “The end felt very disconnected from the narrative I saw. Also, the opening set me up to expect a story about the mother, whom I barely met” (1986); “There was no through line, so I was unsure what the creators intended for me to come away from the experience with” (2035). So despite an ambivalent ranking, these comments display a negative frustration.

Certainly, with less than %30 of respondents feeling strongly engaged with the characters and less than %20 with the narrative, crucial elements of compelling theatre have fallen short. As Kerr himself says of narrative and character,

I have spent a fair bit of my time, especially in ECT projects defending story, because we are often tugging between the two. Part of what we’re committed to is a strong sense of story, and I believe that it is in our investment in character, it is the empathy that the theatre provokes, it is why we put ourselves outside ourselves, why it becomes meaningful, why it becomes of value.

These question of how to deal with narrative and character given the project’s structural innovations remained very much alive for Kerr when I interviewed him at the end of the project.

Questions 6 – 8 dealt with these structural innovations themselves, people’s experiences with the multiple narrative structure and the moments of intersection. When asked how aware they were of the other lines the responses were very consistent:

²³¹ Combining the three lines into single values (rather than identifying rankings for each narrative line separately) did not skew the values to any significant degree.

	never	occasionally	constantly
Awareness	%6	%81	%14

Table 4.2 Awareness of other audience lines

‘Occasionally’ suggests the audience was aware of the other lines on the occasions that they were within sight, and did not have an overwhelming sense of simultaneity throughout. While a few comments did identify a constant awareness, most resonated with the following feedback: “Only really thought about the other groups during intersecting story points.”

When asked about the experience of these other lines going on at the same time, the results were even more streamlined:

	distracting	irrelevant	intriguing
Reaction	%8	%6	%86

Table 4.3 Experience of other narrative lines

Once again, the qualitative comments do much to help us interpret the nature of the ‘intrigue’ felt by the vast majority of respondents. Certainly there was an underlying condition of enjoyment of these moments. Aside from such a high percentage ranking it positively, most comments declared these moments the highlight of the experience. However, such enjoyment was not without dissatisfaction. First of all, for many, it was too little. They craved a higher frequency of intersecting lines:

The moments when our narrative line encountered and interacted with another group's were undoubtedly the most exciting, engaging, and unique parts of the experience. In fact, these were the only times that I felt engaged and excited by the pieces... though I did feel VERY MUCH so for those few minutes. I wanted more!

A second theme that emerged in response to the multiple lines and their intersections was not just that they happen more, but that they *mean* more:

I wanted to really feel an impact of their story line with my story line and the other story line;

I couldn't have told you what the purpose of these [intersections] was;

Intriguing! But unfulfilled. So frustrating and disappointing;

I wanted more!!!! There were such small and fleeting moments that I needed more to really feel the overall implications of their story in relation to my story in relation to the overall story, to gain any impact on my personal journey. Each interaction was so separate, literally through glass on both occasions, that I wanted the wall to be broken to engage with the deeper meaning of what you were attempting to achieve.

It certainly seems that the audience grasped the potential of this structural device, but found it wanting nonetheless. *Impact, fulfillment, purpose, implications*. The absence of these qualities hearkens back to the relatively un-engaging elements of character and narrative perhaps reinforcing Kerr's instinct; they are the means by which theatre makes us care.

Lastly, a theme related to wanting the intersections to mean more, was the desire to be able to experience all three lines and establish a larger context into which they might fit.

I wondered whether the depth of the narrative would have shown up in viewing the other narratives... but wasn't able to do that.

I could not help but be curious most of the time about what the other groups were getting, and feeling like I was not getting a whole picture.

I was so curious to what was happening in their stories and what we represented in their stories. I wish I could watch all three threads.

In each case, the assumption is that a view of the whole would increase the coherence of a part.

Having attended four nights in a row and seen all three narrative lines, I can suggest that in this instance that would not necessarily have been the case. Because each line was written more or less independently of the other two, there was not an emergent property of coherence once all three were grasped. That the audience immediately assumed this would be the case, however, is telling. We expect coherence. When given partial experience, we expect the rest to be clarifying. Such a strong instinct about the potential of the tool suggests its power. Were it built to fit together into a larger coherent form, like three pieces of a puzzle, it would likely make a tremendous 'reveal' as the theatre world calls it, the 'aha' moment for an audience when meaning takes shape in their minds.

Trying to accomplish this with three narrative lines suggests restructuring the evening so that the each group rotates through the other lines, in order to capture that larger coherence.

This raises the question of how to structure the emergent dynamics within the piece. But if the three lines were to stitch together into a coherent experience, then the writing process of *You Are Very Star* would have had to feature a stronger degree of Collier's 'Table Work' to make sure the governing architecture was sound. The decision to have a separate writer write each line made this impossible.

4.8 Relearning old lessons? Reflections on an ambitious experiment

This concern leads into the follow-up interviews with project leaders David Hudgins and Kevin Kerr. Hudgins was well aware of the shortcomings identified above:

A comment I got quite a bit was "I didn't understand what was going on." So that is a lack of engagement right there. For example, the people in the '68 line didn't understand that she was the same character as the woman on the table. That's the worst, when you feel like you've lost an audience because they disengage.

This is a good example of insufficient dramaturgy and direction. A director is in charge of managing the audience's experience. In the ink-blot cougar tension, this was not an inkblot moment, the continuity of that character was essential to empowering the audience at a very fundamental level.

I asked Hudgins whether he felt the project fell short of a necessary level of coherence.

Yes. Yes, you can push me to say that. A lack of coherence, and a lack of 'what's the main thing we are trying to achieve in this project?' The intersections were talked about at great length, but our approach made it difficult. We should have started with those ideas, and then worked out from there. Rather I think we thought, ok, we'll get these narratives going, and then we'll make sure we arrive there.

I suggest this frustration ensued from an incoherent use of procedural emergence. With a specified agenda of substantive emergence (audience intersections) the procedural was simultaneously too free and not free enough. If the larger structural architecture was in place, the process could establish the boxes within which the procedural could play without betraying the larger initiating agenda of the substantive.

Picking up on the audience's intuitions about these intersections of the three lines, the potential here might have been in thinking of them as a puzzle. No matter how obscure any particular moment of a piece may be, if the audience is going to take on agency in the way Kerr described in his discussion of 'tool-use'—the application of things, signs and symbols acquired by an audience during the work—then each moment must have some relationship to the whole. Further, the audience needs to be able to assemble these relationships to some satisfying degree.

But what are these relationships built of and *where* does its 'assembly' take place? Given the larger goal of substantive emergence, I wonder if these questions were too hastily answered? In the case of *You Are Very Star*, a seasoned audience took this larger 'puzzle' to be built of narrative and character. This does not have to be the case. As Kerr says, "a more contemporary version of the theatrical experience is one where there is no story, the theatre is a kind of experiential space where there's no narrative, there's no story, it is something else, imagery, physicality." But if we want our audience to be active agents in their experience, we have to structure this activity, we have to cue it, enable it, empower it, just as the audience of *Sleep No More* is told how to engage and challenged to do so fully, 'fortune favours the bold.' In the case of *You Are Very Star*, we were clearly cued to try and 'solve the puzzle' in our experience of narrative and character, both of which were insufficiently realized to satisfy.

What remains so unresolved for Kerr was whether to let story drive structure or structure drive story.

There are times when I think about the project and I completely forget about what the stories actually were, we could just pluck them out and make a new story. But then again, is there anything more important than the story? Isn't that what we want to find our way into?

Weeks after the production had closed, this dilemma remained unresolved:

It's one of the things in this whole process that feels unclear to me...I don't know if that's just the way it is, where it has to keep going back and forth and back and forth between structure and narrative, this conceit and the characters. Part of me thinks we should stop all this nonsense, write the stories, and then tinker with the structure. Or part of me thinks we should write the architecture, known the time codes, finish the movement of it all and then say, 'Ok, now we've got three minutes to write a scene here'.

Resolving this issue is of course crucial to allowing the structure to lead to the substantive emergence identified at the outset while at the same time achieving a strength and depth of narrative and character such that it matters when we do.

4.8.1 Too much freedom?

The procedural approach to *You Are Very Star* gave each writer a separate line and hoped these would somehow find intersection points. This was not to be the case. For example, Kerr had discussed an idea of moving his line outside where they would be witnessed by another line. As he was trying to figure out the narrative justification for this, the other narrative abandoned it: “I was hooked on that idea, but it got scrapped by one of the other writers, saying ‘oh I scrapped that’, so then there was no point in me marching an audience out to a soggy field.” This illustrates how inefficient the story building process was thanks to the collision of this particular manifestation of procedural emergence as a means and substantive emergence as an end.

Rather than a larger coherence emerging from the three narrative lines and bringing about compelling intersections of various audiences, the opposite took place:

At several points along the way I found that that idea was starting to disappear...I had to push it very hard, but it was difficult because the whole thing was tenuous in terms of trying to find other essentials in terms of story, character, etc.

It is perhaps unsurprising then that the results were unsatisfying. “We managed to touch on it very very very superficially,” says Kerr acknowledging the dissatisfaction with these moments.

Furthermore, one of the genuine discoveries in this process was just how difficult it was to make these intersections work. Not just for the writers but for the director, stage managers and actors, with each scene being precisely timed so that each line goes at a pace where they arrive at the intersection points precisely. Under ‘normal’ theatrical conditions, actors wait in the wings for precise cues. But if the actor is involved in another storyline, this precision is difficult, furthermore if the actor in question is an audience that is not supposed to know that they are about to ‘step into character’ in a separate narrative, the kind of precision the theatregoers expect is impossible. Even what *You Are Very Star* did manage to accomplish, says Kerr, “proved to be extraordinarily challenging, much more than the payoff in the audience experience. I don’t think anybody in the audience would have sensed viscerally, the level of machinery that was required to have that happen.”

4.8.2 Or not enough?

However, if Kerr and the Electric Company read this experience exclusively as a series of practical lessons and admonish themselves for forgetting the well-worn ECT lessons of structuring emergent dynamics this will miss what this experiment points towards and retreat back into proven methods too quickly. The objective of this experiment was to integrate “well-madeness with the open-ended” or what became known as the ‘inkblot-cougar’ problem. The experiential goal of the project was to find a fluidity between moments where the full magic of theatre was in effect, where we were swept up in character, narrative, image, idea, etc., and moments that were very open-ended, interactive, associative, user-driven. Seeking this balance shows a sober instinct not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, to try and capitalize on the strengths of the idiom while improvising on its assumptions. This is a delicate ambition, like fixing a moving vehicle, and perhaps tackling such an inquiry with such a heavy commitment to procedural emergence might have understandably misfired.

But perhaps this misfiring has been overly characterized as a practical failure. Perhaps the problem lies not in how they pursued the balance, but in the difference between what they said they were pursuing and what emerged. What was initially intended to juxtapose crafted theatre failed to arrive at anything open-ended or individually directed at all. At no point was there any self-directed engagement with the experience on the part of the audience. We were shepherded through our narrative lines throughout the experience. The narratives themselves were presented to us as stories about characters delivered through dialogue. Crucially, there was no point at which we felt responsible for our experience, despite walking around, dressing up, and stepping into other audience experiences, we remained as passive an audience as if we were left in our seats.

Recall *Sleep No More*, where the audience’s excitement and sense of agency hinges precisely on this sensation of having to take control of one’s own experience. Interviewing someone that went three times, I was told that each time he went back it was with greater purpose, greater interest in getting deeper in the mysteries of the experience, in having an even more responsive encounter this time. Again, without any text, what it means is much more determined by the audience. And without any shepherding, what the audience sees is entirely up to them. This is where the agency of that fluidity seems most potent, and this kind of emancipation and empowerment of the audience was wholly absent from *You Are Very Star*.

Ultimately, I would suggest that *You Are Very Star* ends up in a sort of theatrical no man’s land, ontologically speaking. It gave up enough of its autonomy to the desire for substantive emergence that the piece was left waiting for its audience (it could not author it completely), and yet it did not give up enough of its own autonomy such that its audience was nonetheless still waiting for it (it remained the exclusive author all the

same). One is inclined to wonder whether the extraordinary effort it took to make this small step into audience interactivity would have gotten easier by making a bigger step.

This issue hinges crucially on the question of *where* the work is assembled. The *Sleep No More* example clearly locates the meaning of the experience in the hands of each audience member. This is the boundary that *You Are Very Star* does not cross, and by keeping an expectation of authorship firmly in place, the audience is left passive, waiting for the work to be assembled by those in whose hands we remained placed, actors, writers, director, and designers. All the while, however, it is they who have made their lives so very difficult by trying their best to wait for us.

The resolution to this challenge may come from an enhanced sense of what we mean when we refer to something as 'site specific'. When immersive theatre talks about 'site specificity' it might be useful to understand this as necessitating two locations, the physical and the semiotic. In other words, where the action takes place, and where the meaning and coherence takes place. The Electric Company has proven particularly daring at realizing the creative potential of some extraordinary physical site specificity. What may be useful in pushing the inkblot-cougar problem into a more fruitful realization is to be as daring with a notion of semiotic site-specificity.

Chapter 5: Music From Somewhere

5.1 Deeper into the emergent

As this study of different artistic disciplines responding to a single commissioning document shifted from poetry to theatre, a very different emphasis emerged. The relatively private life of poetry took up the commission at the level of the individual's relationship to self and world. How does the poet approach the challenges of linguistic representation and subject-object tensions amidst Modernist, Romantic, and Post-Modernist instincts? McKay took this on through a process he called 'thingification', that is, seeking out the 'wilderness' condition of domestic objects through a highly reflexive linguistic engagement.

This stood in contrast to the public life of theatre, where Electric Company artistic director Kevin Kerr began his contemplation of the commission document with a preoccupation of theatre's relationship to its audience. *You Are Very Star* took up the themes of the commission in two ways, one, through an attempt to improvise with audience relations in the act of consuming theatre, and two, through an attempt to improvise with the dynamics of collaborative creation in the act of producing it. While I can imagine the entire drama of McKay's engagement with the commission taking place in his living room over the course of a few rainy afternoons, it is hard to conceive of Kerr's work having any privacy whatsoever.

Had I known nothing about Italian composer Giorgio Magnanensi and the work that interests him at this stage in his career, I could only guess at which of these two tracks—the private 'self and world' life of poetry or the public 'art and audience' life of theatre—a musician might choose in pursuing this commission. In other words, there is nothing about music itself that would seem to preclude one or the other direction, indeed, how someone conceives of the commission document obviously says as much about their own creative practice as it does about the content of the commission.

The following chapter is an analysis of Giorgio's engagement with the research project. It is built out of two lengthy interviews and many informal conversations with the composer himself, along with interviews with two of the musicians who collaborated with Giorgio on the works produced for the research, and interviews with eight audience members that attended. The discussion begins with a very brief impression of the work Giorgio produced in response to the commission. This is followed by what I feel is a necessary detour through post-war musical modernism. I hadn't expected to make this little swerve through history, but the more I tried to work with Giorgio's response to the commission, the more I found it essential context for his experimental approach to composition. This allows the discussion to return to Giorgio's work, situating his

musical background against this larger historical backdrop, then exploring recent compositional practice as a precursor to work he did for the GCC commission, and finally exploring the commissioned work itself.

What emerges here is perhaps the most extreme manifestation of the commission ideas. Recall that this commission wanted to look at the practical and ontological consequences of creating work beyond the dichotomies of Modernism. As we have seen already in the previous two commissions, one of the key manifestations of these dichotomies is how the artists negotiate their relationship to the elements of their creative process (stick, boots, chair, experience, memory, and language in the case of McKay, site, colleagues, characters, narrative, and audience, in the case of Kerr). McKay's attempt to use metaphor to dissolve subject-object boundaries as this quest for the 'wilderness' of an object, or even more elaborately, the Electric Company's extraordinary effort to manifest emergent dynamics throughout the creative team as a way of unlocking the 'master-slave' relationships that often characterize theatrical hierarchies offer two examples of efforts to replace the sense of the artist dictating a creative vision *ex nihilo* with an interactive space of responsive negotiations.

In this chapter, Giorgio will take this further in an effort to abdicate the authoring position of composer as thoroughly as possible. I try to frame this as a response to Western art music's extreme manifestation of Modernist ideals. As we will see, it offers an important glimpse into the larger theme of structuring emergent dynamics, the shifting place of expertise within public processes, and our capacity as a public to step into non-modern experience with a sense of place and purpose.

5.1.1 A perplexing result

Giorgio received the commission documents along with the other artists in January of 2011. His immediate instincts were to approach it in very much the same spirit as Kevin Kerr, seeing it as a challenge to shift the processes of producing and consuming music away from solitary acts of an isolated creative agency towards more collective processes of collaborative creation. The result was something that struck me as extremely experimental. A string ensemble (violin, viola, cello, bass) was assembled on the main floor of the Centre for Interactive Research in Sustainability, UBC (see figure 5.1 below). Positioned above them, in a series of balconies overlooking the main floor, were members of the Vancouver Electronic Ensemble. They each had different instrument or other electronic noise-making device of some kind. The audience was invited to move throughout the space, including in and out of a series of different boxes taped on the floor. These boxes, we were told beforehand, were intended to provoke musical responses from the players. Giorgio himself was at a computer working with digital imagery that was projected onto a screen, though the direct relationship with the sounds being generated was not immediately apparent.



Figure 5.1 Audience participants interact with musicians through designated squares on the floor

The piece lasted about thirty minutes during which time I was unable to detect any melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic patterns, or any formal structure whatsoever. The beginning, middle, end, and practically all points in between sounded more or less the same. A mono-textural, mono-chromatic mass of sound generated in a highly unstructured process. While it was possible to detect occasional interactions between audience members and musicians (via the boxes), I was unable to perceive much in the way of interactions between the musicians themselves. We all seemed similarly caught up in a swirling mass of sound, with nothing perceivable to which we might assign any kind of meaning. As a listener with a degree of experience in some of the more adventurous languages of ‘contemporary music’ I nevertheless found this highly disorienting. Yet as an admirer of Giorgio’s work and the way he thinks about the place of music in the world, I knew there would be substantial thought and passion for the relationship between music and audience behind what was happening.

So what was happening? And how does it relate to the commission? Admittedly, my initial instinct was to say ‘nothing. Nothing was happening.’ The work was so formless, it ‘said’ so little, that there seemed little to say in response. However, at the same time, the process that produced this experience offers a rich engagement with the commissioning ideas, although this may be less apparent without a sufficient interpretive context. In other words, I feel that this project speaks to the commission ideas very much as a larger response to its own idiom (formal concert music, or art music, or what is commonly known by the catch-all ‘classical music’).

Without some sense of the origins and lifespan of musical modernism (identifiable as the music produced within the tradition of ‘classical music’ during the bulk of the 20th century), I fear the significance of the work will be missed. In trying to grasp and communicate this significance, we must indulge a brief discussion of Western classical composition with a particular focus on the post-World War II avant-garde movements in Europe and America.

5.2 The rise of Musical Modernism

Trying to capture ‘the’ story of musical modernism and its larger relationship with 20th Century history is obviously futile. This era features more musicians exploring more styles in more political contexts within a greatly-expanded industry, all of which is being documented more thoroughly than any previous era, leaving an immensity of plausible narratives. The narrative I will pursue here is in keeping with my larger preoccupation with art as a recursive microcosm of its encompassing worldview, that of Modernism.²³² How does the relationship between Modernism and musical modernism develop once classical music enters its ‘modern’ period? How does this help us understand the work of someone like Giorgio Magnanensi, working a full century after musical modernism began? And how does this serve our larger purpose here, groping for the exit from Modernism more generally.

Despite its endless layers, the story of musical modernism has a widely accepted start date: May 29th, 1913, the premiere of Stravinsky’s ‘Rite of Spring’. Referred to as the “prize bull” that “inseminated the whole modern movement,”²³³ the period of music that follows is one of the most dynamic periods of classical music, and yet, one of eventual demise. Today the vast majority of ‘classical music’ that is performed in our various institutions predates this period. New compositions by living composers are rarely heard outside small factions huddled around dwindling funding sources. Audiences for ‘new music’ concerts have narrowed to one composed almost entirely of colleagues (other composers) and very few works are performed beyond their premieres.

As someone who has performed and recorded new music in Canada and made several appearances on CBC Radio’s *Two New Hours* (the now-defunct weekly national radio program dedicated to contemporary music), I have some familiarity with how uninvolved this music is in the public imagination of today. Discussing the

²³² ‘Modernism’ is becoming a trickier term for this discussion to use as two relevant but distinct definitions start to overlap in the 20th century. ‘Modernism’ as I have been using it refers to cultural Modernism, an umbrella term for the dawning of the secular age, the era that includes the Enlightenment, The Scientific and Industrial revolutions, and only now finds itself in some meaningful endgame of sorts. Within this larger term is the notion of ‘musical modernism’ covering the post-tonal, post-19th century age, generally marked, with the premiere of the Rite of Spring (1913) and waning some time towards the end of the 20th century, depending on how much credence one gives to the label ‘post-modernist’ music and whether one considers this later style significant enough to constitute the end of musical modernism and the beginnings of a new musical era. I will try and keep these two ‘modernisms’ distinct by referring to cultural modernism as ‘Modernism’ and ‘musical modernism’ with its qualifier.

²³³ Robert Craft. “The Rite of Spring: Genesis of a Masterpiece.” *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Autumn - Winter, 1966), p.20.

dwindling arc of new music with someone who was once considered one of the bright new compositional talents in Canada, he simply remarked: “Composition is dead.”²³⁴ As Richard Taruskin argues in his *Oxford History of Western Music*, this tradition, with its extreme historical self-consciousness, “condemned artists to a social irrelevance that, ironically enough, had no historical precedent.”²³⁵

Yet it is precisely due to this unfortunate state of affairs that I am so interested in including contemporary music in this larger exploration of the relationship between art and sustainability. The commission document that began this exploration was itself an attempt to frame sustainability as the hope to find or fabricate something of a soft landing on our long exit from Modernity. Exploring musical modernism as one dwindling trajectory of the larger spirit of cultural Modernism may provide something of a bell-weather riding. If musical modernism can be understood as an early expiration of Modernism, might charting this narrative of demise shed some light on the potential endgame of Modernism more generally? At the very least, it remains essential to understanding what Giorgio Magnanensi might be up to in his search for creative vitality beyond the conceptual parameters of the artistic world in which he developed.

5.2.1 The quest for absolute value

In the methods section of this discussion I used a brief example of 19th century music to illustrate a recursive relationship between art and key conceptual instincts of Modernism. In other words, a model both ‘of and for’ such instincts: Music is shaped by Modernism, and in turn, shapes its constituents along Modernist lines. Subject-object dualisms create a sense of absolute rather than relativist value, simultaneously relying on and evoking a metaphysics of transcendence. From the late 18th century until the mid- to late 20th century I suggest these features sink deeper into classical music, furthering its Modernist tendencies as I hope to show with a few brief historical anecdotes.

5.2.1.1 Composer as hero

First, a central thrust of Romanticism’s rebellion against the reductive rationality of the Enlightenment was the irreducible power of human creativity and imagination. The artistic vision was wholly other, emerging not from within a set of material processes that could be identified and predicted according to mechanical laws, but would remain a transcending mystery of human reality, thus forging a resistance of sorts to the sweeping ethic of rationalism. Beethoven (1770-1827) offered an irresistible personification of this idea as a deaf composer, someone that “hears music”, and yet is deaf to the sounds of the world. Even now we have a

²³⁴ In conversation with Bradshaw Pack, March 8, 2013. To put this remark in context, Pack remains a dedicated teacher of music history, theory, and composition, so this is not an embittered dismissal of the place or value of music in human culture, but rather a diagnosis of the vitality of a particular trajectory of music, namely institutionalized contemporary composition.

²³⁵ Richard Taruskin. *The Oxford History of Western Music: Volume five*. Oxford University Press. 2009. 222.

mythic sense of him wrapped in an earthly silence, hearing instead from the very depths of the human soul to the furthest reaches of heaven. Perhaps ironically, however, we might see this as itself a very Modernist trope in that the Romantic creative genius closely parallels the Enlightenment scientist. Both represent ostensibly secular agencies that acquire unprecedented social influence based on an elite access to transcendent realms (i.e. natural laws or cultural ‘truths’).

5.2.1.2 The emergence of an industry

The heroic view of human creativity was well met by the rise of the middle class in the 19th century. Two industries emerge that deepen a Modernist sense of music’s relationship with its public. First, music publishing creates a public object of the printed score, allowing the transcendent presence of inscription to further displace an immanent presence of performance and aural transmission.²³⁶ Securing the essence of a work in text rather than performance allows that work to exist in silence. Players do not have to be present and playing their instruments for the work to exist. This makes it easier to conceive of the truth of the work as existing entirely in the work itself, in the order of pitches, rhythms, and harmonies as they are laid out in print, rather than in any moment of exchange with an audience. It needs neither the hands of a player nor the ears of a listener to be. Thus the score becomes the most authoritative artifact of the musical process in the classical tradition.²³⁷

Alongside a burgeoning publishing industry, the middle class creates a concert industry unlike anything that had previously existed.²³⁸ The role of the professional musician shifts from servants of church (Bach) and court (Mozart, Haydn), to wealthy cultural icons (Liszt, Paganini, Verdi, Rossini, etc.). I think it is fairly uncontroversial to suggest that the career of J.S. Bach (1685-1750) only really took off in the 19th century, despite his death a century earlier. While alive, Bach supplied music for weekly church services amidst complaints that it was overly complex for the proper worship of God. A century later that worship turns to the man himself.

5.2.1.3 The imagined audience: social or historical?

In addition to these developments, Modernist instincts sink deeper into musical life in the early part of the 19th century through subtler means. No longer are composers writing for a concrete, often personified, aesthetic taste, either that of the church or a specific aristocrat. With the rise of publishing and concerts, music is increasingly written for ‘the public’, very likely as nebulous an entity in the 19th century as it is today.

²³⁶ Obviously this transition began with musical notation centuries earlier, however the printed score is not a public artifact until the 19th century.

²³⁷ Certainly one of the most rigorous aspects of my own training as a pianist speaks to this. Score study, the task of learning how to read a score in order to understand the composer’s true intentions and therefore perform the work ‘properly’, is central to becoming a classical musician. Such a stern priority is all but non-existent in most other musical traditions where performers are much more involved in the creative aspect of music-making (incidentally, it is also only in the 19th century that such a distinction between composers and performers starts to emerge).

²³⁸ See Robert Pattison. *The Triumph of Vulgarity: Rock Music in the Mirror of Romanticism*. Oxford University Press. 1987.

What I suggest is significant about this is that now composers must imagine their audience. ‘Who am I writing for? Who do I hope will like this?’ Richard Taruskin divides the anticipated audience into two possible camps, the historical and the social. The social audience is the consuming public whose engagement with music is in the act of listening to it. The purpose of writing music with a social priority in mind is to make an immediate, communicative gesture.

The historical audience, however, is the tradition itself. With this priority in mind one is writing music in conversation primarily with other music. Taruskin refers to the historical self-consciousness as “Neo-Hegelian”, identifying a sense of continued development along a linear destiny: “*The language of music is a universal language that has undergone a single historical development, of which the most advanced contemporary stage is perforce the only historically valid and viable language at any given time.*”²³⁹ If the social priority values a communicative act, the historical priority values a progressive one. How well does the work address issues of melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic qualities in light of what came before it? What formal or structural innovations does it propose? In other words, does this piece of music help the larger category of ‘Music’ *progress*?²⁴⁰

A brief example might illustrate the tension that stems from this concern. Near the end of his life Beethoven wrote a final group of string quartets that would become known simply as ‘the Late Quartets’. Upon publication they were declared incomprehensible and unplayable. They were, to use a telling phrase, ‘ahead of their time’, surpassing the performer’s technical capacity to execute them and the public’s listening capacity to understand them. Eventually, however, these works would teach performers how to play them, and with a little more time, audiences how to listen to them as well. Such is the historical priority at work: a creative act outstrips the capacities of its context, providing the impetus for those capacities to evolve.

But to think of this in terms of evolution and adaptation would be to miss the psychological dimensions of the story. Any fan of the Late Quartets will feel what a dangerously unreliable judge of value the social priority is. The public was wrong! Those works took music into a place it would never have ‘discovered’ had Beethoven written with a social priority in mind. As with science, music must trust its own methodologies as it cannot entrust itself to public subjectivities. What is more—and will become deeply relevant to the coming age of musical modernism—the educated public also learns (albeit slowly and inconsistently) that it cannot trust itself either. We ourselves become deeply self-conscious of the unreliable subjectivity of taste. The

²³⁹ Taruskin, 2009. 16.

²⁴⁰ Again I think the influence of Beethoven cannot be overestimated here as no other composer drove a constant path of innovation throughout his life.

experience of the Late Quartets—some of the most sublime music devotees of the Western canon ever encounter—is enough to haunt the act of judgment.

5.2.1.4 The origin of value?

Thus Modernism comes to cast a long shadow as this approach to ‘making’ music acquires a deep sense of *discovering* its value. Such value is obviously transcendent, objective, and therefore absolute, as surely the work is exactly what it was before its public ‘caught up to it’. It is the same order of pitches. It is the same rhythms. It is the same instrumentation, the same modulations, the same formal structures. It is the same! (Again, an identification possible only because the work exists in written form by now). Only we, humans, players and listeners, have changed. Once we value an object, there is such a deep and natural assumption that such value is rooted in the object’s intrinsic features rather than that with which we imbue it via our own subjective agency.

The instinct that value is the work of *recognition* rather than *infusion* is surely one of the deeper grooves Modernism has worn into the minds of its constituents, one of the more exposed mechanisms of subject-object dualism. The sense of a thing’s value as absolute rather than relative, a result of its features rather than a result of its relations, is perhaps the ultimate stake in this research. For if we had some handy idiom, some instinctive conceptual heuristic that intuitively grasped the way a piece makes its public and a public makes its piece, we might be audacious enough to declare Modernism truly over (however much we might accept Latour’s argument that we were never really there).

This raises questions that cut to the very heart of this research. What is the difference between recognized and infused value? If, for the purposes of this inquiry, we presume the latter to be more descriptively fruitful at this stage in history, how can we be prescriptive about it? How do we go about experiencing that subject-infused reality? What do we make of it when we do? Is there an equivalence between the historical priority we’ve just encountered, and the Heideggerian/Marcusian notion of artistic agency laid out in the theoretical framework—that sense of art as a “push” that enters history? Can such artistic agency thrive within a metaphysics of immanence, a conceptual context that explicitly implicates its own subjectivity in any awareness of its objects? Or would such agency perish in an imaginative context? Would we become increasingly reflexive, change-friendly beings in such a world? Or does it induce a steady regurgitation of familiar realities for comfort’s sake?

These questions will become a central preoccupation of the concluding discussions. For now, what is important is to feel this Modernist mechanism at work, this sense of Western art music as convinced of its absolute rather than relative value. This framing would exert tremendous influence over the way the classical

tradition creates and consumes its icons (composers and compositions) through the rest of the 19th and much of the 20th centuries.

5.2.1.5 *Rite of Spring*: the paradigm case

It is fitting then that the premiere of ‘Rite of Spring’—the birth of musical modernism—plays out the tension of these different priorities (historical and social) so dramatically. Widely regarded as the most influential piece of 20th century music, its premiere is infamous for provoking the “Riot of the Rite”—fist fights in the normally demur aisles of the concert hall. Stravinsky was devastated:

Diagalev gives me horrible news about how people who were full of enthusiasm and unwavering sympathy for my earlier works have turned against this one. I simply cannot write what they want from me—that is, repeat myself—repeat anyone else you like, only not yourself!—for that is how people write themselves out. But enough about ‘Le Sacre’ [the Rite], it makes me miserable.²⁴¹

Here the composer lies torn between social approval and historical priority, sweating the influence of the public while insisting he maintain a progressive relationship with music. A year later, when a remount of the work earns Stravinsky “a triumph such as composers rarely enjoy”²⁴², the message is clear. The historical priority along with the cultural evolution it provokes is the artist’s very reason for being. Over the coming decades, pursuing music’s next great ‘discovery’ will yield ever less communicative music.²⁴³ Yet the art is so enchanted with a sense of its own destiny that any grumbling about ‘listenability’ is met with disdain as the historical priority becomes “the most sacred of all modernist dogmas.”²⁴⁴

Obviously this sketch goes too fast to be sensitive to the textured landscape of its interest. The aim is to provide just enough context to establish the entrenchment of composer, score, and historical self-consciousness as priorities of musical modernism by the end of World War II.²⁴⁵ From here, two avant-gardes, one European, one American, will set out in opposite directions and yet somehow manage to walk strikingly similar paths through the second half of the 20th Century. This irony will have important implications for understanding Giorgio Magnanensi’s work along with the larger questions of this research.

²⁴¹ Taruskin, NY Times, September 14, 2012.

²⁴² Taruskin, NY Time, September. 14, 2012.

²⁴³ There are, of course, many exceptions as certain factions of composers resist this move towards increasingly experimental harmonic language. See Chapter 8, ‘Music for All’ in Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise*. Picador. New York. 2007.

²⁴⁴ Taruskin, 2009. 431.

²⁴⁵ John Cage offers an ironic ‘non-exception’ to this. Despite his anti-modernist efforts to resist the act of authorship through the use of chance, he emerges as much a singular controlling voice in the creative process as ever. This will be discussed further on.

5.3 The Zero Hour: music post-World War II

The social and political backdrop of the post-War period is almost unimaginable. The full horrors of Nazism and the death camps have just been unearthed, the United States has annihilated over a hundred thousand civilians in seconds with atomic weapons, and the chill of the Cold War could be felt settling in everywhere. The prospect of crawling out from under the ruins of Western society, with its “all pervading image of rubble and waste” was, as Taruskin says, “paralyzing”. “All of the bizarre and contradictory musical events and phenomena ... must be understood as counterpoints against these intractable and irresolvable dilemmas that unbalanced the world's mind.”²⁴⁶

Perhaps the most telling diagnosis of the age was Germany's *Stunde Nulle*, or ‘zero hour’, “a time without a past. The necessity to start from scratch, to reject the past in its totality.”²⁴⁷ In the wake of the horrors of war there was a desire to carry nothing forward, yet in the presence of Sartre's existentialism, the “curse of free will”, there was a profound understanding of the need to speak up. The failure to do so—it was possible to assert from the late 1940s—was how Hitler had taken power. As a result, automatism became a central compositional virtue, the desire to generate musical patterns through automated procedures (e.g. mathematical formulas or chance). As Italian composer Luciano Berio put it, ways of making music “without being personally involved.”²⁴⁸

5.3.1 Diverging avant-gardes

For the European avant-garde, this meant a return towards the deeply rationalized, mathematically structured approach known as ‘serialism’ that had been developed to little acclaim before the War by Arnold Schoenberg and a few lonely colleagues.

The composer has come to distrust his inspiration because it is not really as innocent as it was supposed to be, but rather conditioned by a tremendous body of recollection, tradition, training, and experience. In order to avoid the dictations of such ghosts, he prefers to set up an impersonal mechanism which will furnish, according to premeditated patterns, unpredictable situations.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁶ Taruskin, 2009. 3.

²⁴⁷ Taruskin, 2009. 18.

²⁴⁸ Taruskin, 2009. 18.

²⁴⁹ Ernst Krenek, “Extents and Limits of Serial Techniques,” in *Problems of Modern Music: The Princeton Seminar in Advanced Musical Studies*, ed. Paul Henry Lang (New York: Norton, 1962), p 90-91

This from Austrian serialist composer Ernst Krenek helps set this creative strategy against the larger social context of the age. The resonance with scientific methodologies that emerged out of the religious wars of the 17th century is unmistakable. At the heart of Modernism lies a desire to discover the world without us, to arrive at a purifying methodology free from the burden of implication.

This consistent juxtaposition against violence does raise the provocative question as to whether this was epistemologically or politically motivated. The American avant-garde, led by John Cage was equally enthusiastic to abandon history but took an opposite exit route. Instead of deeply rationalized ‘premeditated patterns’, Cage turned to the irrational, generating chance to guide composition. For example, his extensive use of the Chinese I-Ching, tossing coins as a way of making musical choices. Thus opposite extremes, determinacy and indeterminacy, are invoked to pursue a kind of self-denying creativity as a means to flee the past.

But despite the rhetoric and elaborate strategies invoked, the tenacity of the past would not be so easily overcome. The composer in both avant-garde schools remains every bit the Romantic genius. Rather than eradicating the past, post-war compositional processes were obsessed with it. Taruskin has little trouble demonstrating what he calls “the latent continuity between the Romantic impulses and the impulses that drove modernism, even (or especially) its most intransigent, avant-garde wing.”²⁵⁰ John Cage, who ostensibly decried the autocracy of the composer by making music with the toss of a coin, was profoundly controlling of his performers while expecting his audiences to sit through experiences that he himself did not intend to be communicative. Far from eradicating the past, post-war composition could hardly be more obsessed with it.

This social impetus of the ‘zero-hour’ myth that had inspired avant-garde experimentalism did not act alone. It had an equally strong, however unlikely, political impetus as well. As the Soviet Union began ‘disappearing’ artists accused of “not having outgrown a childish dogma of innovation for the sake of innovation”²⁵¹, innovation became dogma in the free West. Perhaps one of the most peculiar instances of this came when the American Military Government in Germany along with the CIA became financial backers of the European musical avant-garde.²⁵² Where once the avant-garde was an anti-establishment, political leftist movement (i.e. Brecht) now it became an odd form of political propaganda used to wave the state-sponsored flag of free expression.²⁵³

²⁵⁰ Taruskin, 2009. 67.

²⁵¹ Taruskin, 2009. 11.

²⁵² Alex Ross. *The Rest Is Noise*. HarperCollins. 2009. 380-381.

²⁵³ This irony was recently taken up by Ian McEwan in his latest novel, *Sweet Tooth*.

With such committed social conscientiousness and political license both avant-gardes push their artistic explorations to extreme lengths. The European avant-garde sought ‘total serialism’, a maximum of musical materials (pitch, duration, rhythm, dynamics, form) under the control of mathematical rules. The process sought what Pierre Boulez (1925-) described as “musical evidence” (such were his scientific yearnings), a good old-fashioned desire for objectivity: “Once the algorithms governing a composition are known, it is possible to demonstrate the correctness of the score more decisively and objectively than is possible for any other kind of music.”²⁵⁴

John Cage and the American avant-garde continued to push in the opposite direction, towards maximum disorder. Computer-generated ‘tunes’ played by fifty-two tape recorders in fifty-two different tuning systems (going on for 4.5 hours), scores built from star maps to “ink a note wherever there was a heavenly body,” and perhaps most famous of all, the *4’33*, a published, copyrighted blank page, prefaced with instructions for how to follow the lack of notation.

Cage’s ideas and works eventually led to development of *Fluxus* (1961), a performance ‘ensemble’ united by “a feeling that ... certain long-established bounds are no longer very useful.”²⁵⁵ *Fluxus* took Cage’s ‘Happenings’ (contemporary music performances) and transformed them into ever more extreme attempts to innovate. In practice this consisted mostly of a search for new ways to offend one’s audience. *Hommage a John Cage* (Nam Jun Paik) consisted in moving through the crowd at intermission, “cutting men’s neckties off with scissors, slicing coats down the back with a razor blade, and squirting shaving cream on top of their heads.”²⁵⁶ Another work ended with instructions for the brass players to move to the front of the stage and blare notes at the audience until they leave. In the words of *Fluxus* member Dick Higgins, “The composer is well aware of the psychological difficulties his compositions may produce for some, if not all, of the audience. He therefore finds excitement in insisting on this.”²⁵⁷

5.3.2 Similar fates

The larger irony at play is that despite their differences both avant-gardes resulted in the same incommunicative incoherence. For Cage’s chance music, this was not only understandable, but perhaps even intentional, “I could not accept the academic idea that the purpose of music was communication.”²⁵⁸ But for

²⁵⁴ Taruskin, 2009. 36.

²⁵⁵ quoted in Michael Nyman. *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*. NY: Schirmer, 1974. 64.

²⁵⁶ Nyman, 1974. 74.

²⁵⁷ Nyman, 1974. 74.

²⁵⁸ David Revoll, *The Roaring Silence*. John Cage: A Life. New York, Arcade Publishing. 1992. 89. Incidentally, the irony of declaring communication an academic priority could not be any more rich, for it is the academy served as a kind of life-support for non-communicative music for most of its career.

serialist music to sound no different than chance is a sadly ironic. For all the precision that went into constructing this music, the listener “has no way of knowing (and, no matter how many times one listens, one will never have a way of knowing) that the notes one is hearing are the right notes, or (more precisely) that they are not wrong notes.”²⁵⁹ If Cage’s incommunicativeness was intentional, the serialists would eventually adopt a similar position, declaring “the audible results ... incidental.”²⁶⁰

This brings us to the fundamental crisis of musical modernism. Riding a kind of artistic autonomy rooted in a neo-Hegelian narrative of progress mixed with a desire to find an adequate response to its social and political context, the musical avant-garde pushed experimental musical languages to the extreme. But was it a Hegelian ‘destiny’ to offend its public enough and to show them enough disdain and arrogance that one’s art would ultimately set a historical precedent for irrelevance? Did *Fluxus* think they would ridicule their audience into waking from their bourgeois state? Did the serialists assume that eventually people’s brains would evolve into serial computational devices to keep up with their mathematical noise?

Cage had hoped that music would replace the act of communicating with an act of opening people’s minds to new experiences. It would seem it had the opposite effect. Rather than a public that is more open to new musical horizons, the patience for experimental music was decimated. When Cage himself became one of the targets at a *Fluxus* show, he was left “wondering if his influence on the young was altogether a good one.”²⁶¹ In 2000, Nam Jun Paik would dismiss his *Fluxus* activities as a “kind of stupid avant-garde, ... the antics of a groupie infatuated with Cage and the idea of liberation.”²⁶² By the late 1960s the movement held no purchase on the public imagination. “Suspected of frivolity at a time of severe political unrest, the avant-garde found its reason for being undermined, and it largely evaporated. Its political energy...passed, for the most part, into popular culture.”²⁶³ Dylan’s three chords and the truth eclipsed any political agency the avant garde might have desired leaving a relationship between elite art and radical politics in tatters, something that will arise in the forthcoming discussion of Giorgio’s work.

For the serialists, the question of whether the audience had abandoned the genre for good eventually wouldn’t matter as many of the composers began to do so themselves. This experiment did not, as their founder Arnold Schoenberg predicted, open a new horizon for music. What may have started out as a sincere attempt to form an adequate response to their tragic post-war world became, in the words of one of the most

²⁵⁹ Taruskin, 2009. 36.

²⁶⁰ Ernst Krenek, “Extents and Limits of Serial Techniques,” in *Problems of Modern Music: The Princeton Seminar in Advanced Musical Studies*, ed. Paul Henry Lang (New York: Norton, 1962), p. 83

²⁶¹ Taruskin, 2009. 92.

²⁶² Taruskin, 2009. 92.

²⁶³ Taruskin, 2009. 94.

strident serialists, Pierre Boulez, just curiosity, a desire “to find out how far automatism in musical relationships would go.”²⁶⁴

5.3.3 Inescapable humanity

For me, the most telling divestment of experimental music came from American serialist George Rochberg. In a section titled ‘Apostasy’, Richard Taruskin details Rochberg’s abandonment of serialist techniques and the historical priority in favour of communicative language and form. When this happened, it was an astounding move that seemed to contradict the inexorable law of the historical narrative.

Only later did Rochberg divulge the answer ... It turned out that his postmodernist revolt did not happen as spontaneously as he had formerly implied, nor were the reasons for it as theoretical as his discussion of them had been. His last serial work was ...completed in 1963. The next year...his twenty-year-old son Paul, a poet, succumbed to cancer. He found he had no vocabulary with which to mourn his loss or seek solace from it. “It became crystal clear to me that I could not continue writing so-called ‘serial’ music...It was finished, hollow, meaningless.”²⁶⁵

Amidst post-war efforts to ‘start again’ without the baggage of tradition this art abandoned its humanity and that mattered. However much it wanted an aesthetic that would reject any sort of humanism following the war, however much it wanted to pursue its historical destiny, however much it wanted to insist that its virtue lay in the veracity of its procedures, ultimately it did not transcend the need for music to be a communicative act. It could not abandon the need for music to console, to lift, to shake, to sing, to speak to both its makers and its listeners. I understand this period as having taken to heart the extreme anxiety that clung to any sense of human agency and human history following the war, and forging an equally extreme aesthetic in response. One from which it ultimately wanted to come home.

Unfortunately the defensive arrogance of so many of its practitioners had been so extreme and so persistent that there was little in the way of any home to return to.²⁶⁶ The audience had been dismissed and they had indeed departed, either to previous eras of ‘classical music’ where there so-called ‘bourgeois’ sensibilities were

²⁶⁴ Boulez in conversation with Celestin Deliège, quoted in Dominique Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*, trans. Susan Bradshaw (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 52. This is a crucial admission, does this mean they were without the ideals we assumed?

²⁶⁵ Taruskin, 2009. 434

²⁶⁶ If my characterization seems to go too far consider Milton Babbitt’s infamous 1958 article “Who Cares If You Listen?” or the following remark from Schoenberg: “All I know is that [the listener] exists, and insofar as he isn’t indispensable for acoustic reasons (since music doesn’t sound well in an empty hall), he’s only a nuisance.” in *Arnold Schoenberg, Letters*, ed. Erwin Stein, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964), p. 54

not held in contempt, or to the welcoming and communicative engagement of popular music, music that, much to the dismay of the avant garde, was proving itself politically astute and trenchant.

5.4 The total abdication of Giorgio Magnanensi

The rise of scientific rationalism is sometimes narrated as a response to the European religious wars of the 17th century - the desire to secure truth beyond subjectivity, what Thomas Nagel called “the view from nowhere.”²⁶⁷ The echoes of this resound in the pursuit of automaton music following World War II; as if the push away from our subjectivity had somehow not gone far enough and the post war avant-garde would complete this journey with ‘music from nowhere’. As discussed in the theoretical framing of this research, the sustainability crisis can be viewed as the demise of the view from nowhere, a reluctant resignation of our hopes for objective, absolute descriptions and the crisis of how to replace them. In taking up this commission, Giorgio Magnanensi faces the challenge of departing both Modernism and musical modernism at the same time.

My familiarity with Giorgio’s work was only enough to feel that he was appropriate for this research. I had heard some of his music and knew his compositional process to be thoughtful and critically engaged, though I did not know how. I was surprised at just how much my own preoccupations—Modernism, subject-object dualism, transcendence vs. immanence, etc.—had long been part of his efforts to open up what he called a ‘new modality’ of composition.

The introduction to this chapter identified the relationship between musical modernism and Modernism more broadly conceived as resting on key tropes of the classical music tradition that were heightened by 20th century modernism: The priority of composer and score in connection with a belief in a historical destiny rooted in an estimation of a work’s absolute value. As we saw, eventually absolute value wasn’t just a priority; it was an only hope, as the dismissal of the audience left it with no source of social value. Giorgio’s rejection of these fundamental ideas is so encompassing it makes for an almost total abdication of the genre.

5.4.1 A deeper immanence

He describes his own profession in its typical form: the composer as someone who “exercises the power of the poetic genius, who brings art to the poor masses.” Transcendence is in the air when he describes “the genius composer expressing their own sole idea that is present as something to be worshipped and

²⁶⁷ Thomas Nagel. *The View From Nowhere*. Oxford University Press. 1989.

treasured.” This “stale dynamic” he says, is “the model from European society that rests on publishing, selling, collecting...that ego-driven approach...solipsistic,” and yet despite the collapse of musical modernism, he argues “we are still very much attached to this Romanticism.”

For Giorgio, this traditional sense of being a composer is “pretentious, boring, solipsistic, not forward, [and] not community oriented.” His reaction to the hierarchical structures of music making in this tradition is best illustrated by an anecdote:

I was conducting the CBC Radio orchestra and I stopped them and said to the first viola player, ‘how would you like to play this passage?’ He said to me, ‘you tell me what you want, I will do it.’ And I thought to myself, that is exactly what I *don’t* want to do. That dictatorial approach.

Whether conducting or composing, Giorgio’s aim is to abandon linear, hierarchical, ‘subject-object’ dynamics of western art music in favour of meaningful interactions between participants.

This sounds like rhetoric familiar to someone like John Cage or other composers who held democratizing visions in the wake of the totalitarian regimes of the war. An encounter with Giorgio’s much more encompassing abdication reveals just how thin that 1950s rhetoric was. Giorgio redefines his role and his objective as follows: The ‘composer’ becomes “a facilitator to engage people and environments in a creative activity”; the (proposed) piece becomes an “environment, contextualized by specific people and space.” In other words, Giorgio is not attempting to write music *for* this environment, but rather elicit music *from* this environment.

Descriptions of previous projects illustrate how this plays out: Initial improvisation sessions with the players provides initial musical materials in an informal and improvisatory way, nothing is dictated at the outset. Giorgio listens, records, and transcribes this seed material. He then works with it, “expanding and stretching it” before handing it back to the players for another iteration. I hope the previous introduction to musical modernism was enough to reveal how totally unorthodox this is for Western music. A compositional process marked by this iterative, social dynamic taking place within what he calls “a more permeable space of interaction with people”, is so utterly unlike the famous little composing cabin where Mahler would sequester himself to write. Two radically different answers to the question ‘where does music come from?’

5.4.2 Process over product

This shift from a solipsistic visionary agency to a socially interactive agency produces what Giorgio refers to as “a new modality of music production...”

where the engagement of a number of people is fundamentally important in the creation of something, and creation as a modality, as a working process - is what I treasure most. I am not interested in the final product, liking or disliking is related to that old model, where you have to create a beautiful object so that people revere and consider it as art, for me that is not relevant.

Dismissing the value of the final product for the virtue of the process by which it was arrived at defines what Giorgio refers to as his 'post-aesthetic' phase.

This is a label he has borrowed from artist and theorist Suzi Gablik, who has written extensively about the relationship between art and society. As Giorgio says, "it is a phase of my life in which I am not concerned about the aesthetic value of my activity but the energy, the value of the behaviour that is instigated in this approach to composition and performance." In other words, not what he makes, but what he does. What Giorgio treasures about being 'a composer' in this sense is what he calls the "dialogical" exchange of "creative energy that comes from a group, not one source, not the 'divine inspiration'." This bears a deep commitment to immanence, to the work's emergence out of the interactions of present voices. "That's the energy I want to see happen. It's more sharing, communicative, open, democratic, pluralistic."

5.4.3 The full embrace

In the last chapter we saw Kevin Kerr worry about his relationship to the body of work he produced in collaboration with others. Questions of copyright, ownership, authorship etc. were fresh concerns in these new collaborative modalities. For Giorgio they were abandoned outright. He has gone so far in the direction of emergent creativity, that at this point there are rarely scores, rarely objects of any kind that represent the performance, let alone that contain its essence to any degree. "I present material to the performers as opportunities to interact, this becomes the score, the behaviour and the interaction becomes the work. And for that reason it is not my score, not my piece." As a result Giorgio never claims copyright for the works that emerge from these "collective effort to generate a process."

Giorgio's dismissal of the final product in favour of the virtuous process, his unconcerned attitude towards the revered objects of art evokes the 20th century avant-garde. John Cage was credited by much of the subsequent generation of composers along with American expressionist painters as having "given permission." Thanks to Cage it was alright for art to not only change the rules slowly in increments as it had always done, but to break them, flaunt them even. And surely there can be no more respected rule in the art world than that the product matters? Artists are an applied bunch, the show must go on.

5.4.4 Giorgio's imagined audience

Yet if someone has no concern for the final product, is it the same as saying they have no concern for the audience? In other words, isn't the product the audience's exclusive experience with the work? Giorgio admits he is "less and less interested in trying to please any audience." But does this amount to an avant-garde dismissal of the listener? For Giorgio, it is essential that the audience be able to forge relationships with the music beyond simply a passive consumption of a final product:

If people listened to the work without watching, it would be a very different experience than being there, witnessing the specific quality of the piece *not as a score, not as a music composition, but people working there, building through interacting through sound*. That excitement is more important than an aesthetic, than 'congratulations for a beautiful piece'.

His expectation is not that the audience members either make sense of the experience or go home, a kind of 'on/off' relationship with the work. Rather, he hopes to expand that experience, cultivate 'concert' rituals that "allow a larger participation." The desire is to engage audiences at a level deeper than passive consumption typically inspires. Giorgio is after "a space where people are engaged in a group, sharing a specific exercise in communication, exchange, democracy, revealing possibilities through sound, through creative engagements that are metaphors of possible ways of being together." If we can create concert rituals that invite more active engagement than present idioms allow, will this extend to a larger sense of self and world?

Sound as a means to new possibilities of self is rooted etymologically, according to Giorgio:

Remember the latin, *per sono*, 'through sound', we are 'through sound', *per sonum*, so persona, we know each other, we identify each other, through sound. Now the sound is not necessarily musical sound, not necessarily your ideal voice, but your body, your gesticulation, everything that speaks in your body is your voice, so you *are* per sono [through sound]. So you recognize a person through the expanded sense of sound. So in that regard again if you see that as also a wider category of embracing larger spectrums of interactivity among people, then the sound is not just the sound but the environment, the ripples, the interferences, we create through our behaviour.

I love this quote for its methodological qualities. If we have a sense of ourselves as coming to be through the sounds we animate (both ourselves and in relationship) is his music a process that will take advantage of this mechanism to transform sense of self? Is it an interface of the self that can be manipulated? And if so, how? By creating a deeper sense of subjective agency, i.e. performing our effects on a context? Or by offering an almost 'soundtrack-like' accompaniment to our experience of being in the world (i.e. big, small, triumphant,

humble, soft, sad, noble, etc.)?

This is key to understanding Giorgio's thinking, and sets up important questions to be explored further along. For now, his belief in sound as a meaningful place within which we negotiate, improvise, and experience self connects the musical experiences he is proposing to the agency he ascribes to them. There is a kind of soft instrumentalism to this. We are sound so sound can be us. New relationships with sound beget new relationships with self. In other words, if I am interpreting his ideas correctly, the self-sound relationship offers an experiential metaphor that can shift our self-world relationship.

I have spent enough time around music, deeply organized, complex patterns of sound to have an initial instinct that this is correct. I can attest to my own transformative moments entirely begotten through a listening experience. They recall the 'radical decentering' or 'unselfing' experiences discussed in the opening chapter. What brought these experiences on in my case was sitting quietly, listening to music, either live or recorded, where nothing but the patterns of sound elicited a deep sense of difference in self and world. In other words the two general states were passivity (me), and organization/complexity (music). Giorgio's proposal inverts these values, as he claims such transformative moments are less likely within the staid passivity of the concert, and highly structured music requires processes that revert back to older practices Giorgio wishes to leave behind.²⁶⁸

Having already discarded the role of the composer and the tool of the score, it should no surprise that the customs of the concert are next to go. As he says, "this is not a concert, come experience the sound, enjoy the instrument that is this building. Move around. Create your own path. Play. Even you don't have an instrument, you can still play. Participate!" Where the avant-garde eventually rejected their listeners for not being able to listen well enough, Giorgio's complaint seems to be that that is all they do—listen, passively, quietly, unobtrusively.

I asked him to describe his ideal audience:

It would be a group of people I can engage not only for the night, the time of the event, but that I can expansively engage. They are familiar with the process, not full of expectations, a level of curiosity and open mindedness, listen without judgment about aesthetic value, sound, noise. Engaged visually and aurally with the space. Even in a very classic dynamic, if that energy is represented, it can happen. But I

²⁶⁸ I am not trying to polarize our positions here as my experiences are doubtless a direct result of my own conditioning, I have been sitting passively in concerts my entire life. It is the way I know how to connect deeply with music. This may not apply to less conditioned audiences (i.e. practically everyone else) and therefore Giorgio may be very correct in his assumption.

am inviting them to witness something that is not always there through a classic way of presenting music—mediation of the score through performers, it's mechanical too often.

So this new way of creating an interactive, mobile audience is not necessarily looking to create something that cannot happen in a classical format, but an increased mobility and interactivity between performers and audience will, according to Giorgio, make this event more likely.

Such ideas, composer as facilitator as opposed to author, music as emergent from an immanent 'environment' rather than an isolated creative vision, and the audience as active participant in a fluid space of engagement, are central components to Giorgio's larger goal of seeking transformative moments through sound. They are also obvious manifestations of the commissioning ideas of this research: a compelling exploration of subject-object boundaries as they typically exist in classical performance and the abandoning of composer and score as transcendent signifier in favour of the immanent agencies of audience and collaborating musicians.

5.5 Commissioned work for the GCC: *Teatro Dell'udito CIRS*

Teatro Dell'udito ('theatre of hearing') is Giorgio's ongoing exploration of his compositional approach, the 'expansive engagement' mentioned above in his discussion of an ideal audience where there is some attempt to cultivate the sustained attention of an audience over time. *Teatro Dell'udito CIRS* is the installment that was held at the Centre for Interactive Research on Sustainability, UBC, on March 18, 2012. It formed Giorgio's response to the GCC commission project.

There were two pieces presented as part of this performance, the first of which I described at the opening of this chapter. Both involved the Vancouver Electronic Ensemble, and an ad hoc string ensemble (in other words a group unaccustomed to playing together). The first piece was in a sense directed by the audience as they interacted with the boxes on the floor, cuing different musical responses. The second piece Giorgio conducted, which was less a matter of him guiding the players through a linear piece of music, but rather shaping dynamics and cuing large accented blasts from the whole ensemble for about twenty minutes. In this second work, the audience was invited to roam around while the musicians took their cues from Giorgio.

In an interview with Giorgio after the performance had taken place, I asked him about the development process of these works. What surprised me about his response was not his content but his brevity in this regard. For someone who is inclined towards long, engaging discussions about music in general, he seemed to have little to say about the development of the works specifically.

The first piece (with the boxes and the audience interaction) was described as follows:

A tentative exploration of having two groups of people, performers and audience, in an integration where things may happen not because of the performers, or because of the audience, but because of the interaction. The grid on the floor was a tool for the musicians to articulate a specific response or behaviour when something happens inside a specific parameter of the grid.

I asked if he specified the relationships between the boxes, the musicians and the audience in anyway, and he said no.

I was more interested in facilitating a dialogue between the players and the people. Very simple but I thought it was very effective for what it generates. It was totally out of my control. The camera I was working with was the same but more cryptic. Through movement recognition generating sounds which are not necessarily understandable whether it was random or intentional.

This description will acquire more depth and clarity once the perspective of the collaborators and the audience is included.

For the second work, where there were no boxes or direct audience inputs, the electronic ensemble was given images to work with, in this case 'clouds'. "But not clouds as clouds [but] clouds as cloudiness, dust as dustiness, water as liquidity." They were asked to explore this image and come up with some sounds on their own. The strings were given specific materials, "not score form but patterns with which they could jump in and out of the texture." There was one rehearsal with the strings and, to my surprise, no rehearsal for the electronic ensemble.

When we got together on the day of the performance I assembled things through a conducting strategy. We had a scored map which usually takes the form of helping the ensemble locate itself in the form, an orientation for the musicians. The 'score' involved material for strings, images for the electronic players, and a map.

Giorgio did say the players were welcome to improvise on the score but in rehearsal I noticed he was very specific at least about having the ensemble tightly together on the loud accented moments. In other words the strategy of the second piece seemed to be one of independent straying from coordinated departure points (score excerpts) followed by coordinated accents (cued by Giorgio). Perhaps I did not find enough direct, targeted questions about the development of the works as the conversation moved back into a general discussion of music rather quickly. However, I suspect that I found myself in a position similar to Giorgio in that, given the approach that was used and the minimal preparation that went into it, there was actually little to discuss with regard to the specific strategies and development of the works.

5.5.1 Emergent interactivity or grey-green mush?

I sought to broaden my understanding of the development process by interviewing two of the players involved. Again, they described being given materials, small chunks of different pre-existing pieces, some by Giorgio himself, some by other composers. One of the players recalled these short excerpts being accompanied by philosophical quotations, though he did not remember the substance of these. The strings got together for one rehearsal, where they worked through these excerpts. In the words of one of the musicians, “we were given six measures of a score, we would read it, loop it, he [Giorgio] would ask for dynamic or intensity changes, timbre changes.”

Despite working with pre-existing material, the players were told not to play the notes as written, rather to improvise away from these materials: “Even the most obvious technical elements of [reading] the score were not fixed. It was very impressionistic.” To my surprise this involved the players not even taking the same tempo. “We were reading the score at different tempos, speeding up, slowing down. So we were playing together but not staying together.” I was not able to ascertain what effect this was intended to create other than to manifest a spirit of freedom. It was, in other words, trying to avoid something rather than trying to accomplish something.

This was the only rehearsal before the dress rehearsal (the day of the performance) which was the first time the Vancouver Electric Ensemble met with the other musicians to work through their materials. Not surprisingly then, the players I interviewed did mention they “didn’t have a lot of interaction with the other players”; that there “wasn’t a lot of practice in the traditional sense”; that despite certain ‘ensemble issues’ (i.e. challenges of playing together) I was told “it’s not like we’re playing a Shostakovich Quartet or something”: In total, the preparation period was approximately a week and a half. Predictably enough, the players I interviewed felt there wasn’t enough time for the project to “crystallize”, as one put it. This would certainly have been my instinct with more deeply intentioned, structured, patterned works, but ironically these players felt time was even more necessary with the kind of process they undertook: “More interactive processes take time to work on. We would have benefited from a good three weeks of time.”²⁶⁹

I do not want to jump too quickly to judgment, as I carry a very different set of musical instincts and expectations than this project was investigating, and certainly this project appeared to be a deep engagement with the commissioning ideas that I proposed. However I was very surprised at both the ‘product’ and the process by which it was arrived. Given that this project was based on viewing a collection of players as an environment, and then setting up processes to elicit music from the environment instead of dictating music to

²⁶⁹ However, this remark contradicts the earlier remark, “it’s not like we’re playing a Shostakovich Quartet”, (both made by the same person), revealing the impossibility of getting any consistent sense of whether this approach was considered to be more demanding or less.

that environment, I cannot help but find it disingenuous that such an environment is given only a single rehearsal within which to generate such music, whereupon only half of it was present to begin with.

If the players I interviewed were inconsistent as to whether this way of producing music was more or less rigorous than traditional models, it seems Giorgio was not so conflicted. Normally a composer works for at least several months preparing a score for an ensemble work of this magnitude. I accept that Giorgio's approach may not require this upfront investment of time. He could work very sincerely within his ideals by simply grabbing a few excerpts to serve as starting materials from which the players develop something on immanent terms. But I do not accept that the development process that features one rehearsal with only half the ensemble present and then a dress rehearsal the day of the performance is a genuine engagement with these compositional interests. No prior preparation of materials, then one and a half rehearsals? Within a process that is intended to cultivate emergent dynamic amongst the players?

As the players themselves said, there was neither time nor opportunity for anything emergent to come of this process: "There was very little interaction between players." So while the approach might match the ideals Giorgio laid out above, I cannot see that it was undertaken rigorously enough to test these ideals at all. In fact, I suggest the process does a disservice to his own ideals as they are not given the opportunity to develop into a compelling way of making 'music' together whatsoever.

As one of the players mentioned, "when you take a lot of paint and mix it together, it can turn into a grey-green mush. Sometimes you need strategies for turning the paint off a little more, and have more silence. When you have a reverberant space that's difficult, with sixteen players, it's difficult." Lacking melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic content, sound quality might have been the one thing able to cue our brains to some kind of signal in the noise. But even this remained largely homogeneous and dissonant for almost the entirety of both works.

The idea of our brains dealing with signal-to-noise ratios is a useful way of engaging such an unstructured, pattern-less process of 'sound making'. In any perceptual experience our brains are busily trying to figure out what is signal and what is noise. I doubt the instinct to do this is a cultural construct, though instincts for what constitutes signal and noise, at least in the case of a musical experience, may well be. In the soundscape that was offered as *Teatro Dell'udito CIRS*, how long, I wonder, did our brains try and find signals in the noise? How long did we try and engage with the music as a communicative act?

5.6 Engagement? Interaction? Meaning? Agency?

The audience for this event was typical of new music, friends and colleagues, many of whom I had invited, a high proportion of them had an academic interest in the project, others were music colleagues, so certainly the group had a strong self-selection bias towards complex activities and particularly experimental music. During the performance I tried to split my time between participating as an audience member and observing other audience members. The notes I made after the event observed a kind of sharp polarization in the audience between a high level of engagement and total disengagement. What was interesting was that this wasn't always a separation of individuals, i.e. highly engaged folks from disengaged folks, but often the same individual would go from jumping in and out of boxes to strolling back out of this area and chatting with friends. This observation, I suggest, refutes Giorgio's idea that a physical engagement of the audience increases a predisposition to engage with the sound experience at a potentially transformative degree. During the second piece I noticed a lower degree of engagement generally, even several audience members with their fingers over their ears due to the level of sound, or people that had drifted away from the performance entirely.

The feedback from the event comes from eight different audience members, four of whom I interviewed in detail, four from whom I elicited reactions in more informal discussions. This pool features both people with extensive training in music, and people with no training at all. The following quotes, from different audience members, summarize overall impressions:

It was an uncomfortable waste of time. It was a nice space. There could have been potential here. But the music, well, the concept behind the music, there wasn't really music, it was nonexistent. It was an idea full of potential and a beautiful space but could have housed beautiful music, so there was no reaction. I thought, let's get out of here.

... music to me is not intellectual. When it becomes that, I feel like I am not grasping what that is, and then I feel a little stupid or something. So to me music is an emotional experience. And I didn't really have any emotional experience there. The form didn't create any emotion other than amusement for a while.

I don't think the music was trying to engage me, I didn't have that feeling, no. I had to initiate, it wasn't going to engage with me unless I put myself into it.

I didn't find it evocative, it was intriguing from a process perspective... but nothing ...maybe I like music that is beautiful and I didn't find this beautiful.

I had a visceral reaction [that I] struggled to block the entire time.

I really wasn't paying much attention to the music.

This sample gives a sense of either a strongly negative reaction, or a highly disengaged one.

5.6.1 Emancipating the audience?

Where the audience did seem to engage was with either the boxes in the first piece, or watching the musicians play and Giorgio conduct the second piece.

It was fun to see what box makes what noise, or is going to make someone do something, but then I felt too 'controlly', I felt like every time I wanted to jump in a box I felt bad, "dance monkey dance!"

I wasn't sure what the reciprocation was. I step in a square, maybe I didn't step in there long enough. But I felt uncomfortable, making someone do that.

I liked the spatial element, sound coming from different places, and picking that spot, sound coming from up or down. And the different sounds themselves were interesting

I really enjoyed watching the musicians in the second piece. They were having so much fun. They were so engaged. So focused. I got into them more than I got into the music.

I liked that the composer was so dynamic on his feet, such embodied investment. I was getting a big thrill out of him deeply living the music.

The composer is often the most interesting person to watch, to try and understand what he was doing.

Here audience reactions found a level of enthusiasm, either through participating in the boxes in the first piece, or watching the intentional energies of the musicians and the conductor in the second.

I found the remarks citing discomfort with too much agency in the audience interaction piece very interesting, that jumping in the boxes felt 'controlly' or manipulative. We might have assumed that the audience has historically been some repressed voice that was finally getting a chance to speak (recall Ranciere from the previous chapter), but instead there was a sense of guilt at being given too causal a relationship with

the players. Furthermore, I found no larger aesthetic pay-off in the boxes, people spoke of it as ‘fun’, ‘amusing’ but an effect that did not evoke any language that would suggest anything profound or even remotely transformative occurred. In fact the remark “it didn’t create any emotion other than amusement for a while,” matches my observation of people seeming to engage with it with enthusiasm and then walking away after a few minutes.²⁷⁰

That people’s most lasting positive impression was of *watching* Giorgio, or *watching* the musicians play I find very telling. That is when the experience took on some degree of presence, some articulate presence for them, and struck me as the deepest form of engagement the experience offered, when some expertise was on display, demonstrating a level of ‘dynamism’, an embodiment of the sounds. In other words, it was when that sound world was, in effect, translated via some human activity we could observe and interpret to some degree.

5.6.2 Pattern seekers

This speaks to the comparison of Giorgio’s belief that an active consumption of unstructured sounds creates the greater potential agency for sonic engagement than a passive consumption of highly structured sound typically affords. While I accept that my position is rooted heavily in my own version of the familiar, I was open to whether Giorgio was right in that a contemporary audience would find active engagement preferable. In my limited sample set, this proved not to be the case. My own instincts were confirmed by the other participants I interviewed in a third category of audience feedback, namely a desire for structure, coherence, and intentionality:

We as a species, we know when there is order, and it is not fearful, it is beautiful. So we know when that order is there and its good...looking for patterns, is there a pattern there or not?

The difficult thing with having too many voices is that something loses coherence. I felt this throughout.

Someone needs to be saying ok yes, we want to bring in all these threads but is there a someone providing a shared direction? Otherwise it devolves to chaos and the whole is no longer greater than the sum of its parts.

²⁷⁰ This bears resonance with the audience intersection moments of *You Are Very Star*, again a manufactured attempt at pulling the audience into some causal role that did not seem to have enough meaningful impact on the aesthetic experience to go beyond an experience of ‘amusing, fun, clever’ etc.

Both democracy and emergence deny the skill of the practitioner. And I would also say too that they deny the skill of the listener. Did we hear music? Even if we aren't educated, we know when we are hearing music, no? There is a general literacy.

For there to be an event, a musical event, a better exploration of the echo chamber of the space, a better tension between organized, composed music, with the chaotic computer sounds. Those sounds were so unremarkable. In our world of digital noise it is so meaningless. Thirty years ago we would have gone into an electroacoustic studio and worked tirelessly with punch cards and tape splicing, and therefore the finished product would have had a sense of awe because someone did some work. There was no work here.

The themes present in this feedback form the major points of conclusion for this chapter.

5.7 The fully absent expert

This project recapitulates the question that arose in the previous chapter on *You Are Very Star*: How much emergence is too much emergence? Or more precisely, how to structure creative processes such that emergent dynamics are at their best? Thanks to his own creative and social priorities, along with the prodding of my own ideas contained in the commission document, Giorgio Magnanensi embraced a maximalist approach to incorporating emergent dynamics in the works 'prepared' for *Teatro Dell'udito CIRS*. In other words, such a deep commitment to the approach in principle seems to have eliminated any interrogation of its application in practice. The virtue of the process eliminated any need to reflect on the value of the product.

5.7.1 The ironic absence of emergence

As mentioned above by an audience member, humans are pattern seekers, and the magic of emergent dynamics is that pattern, organization, and order emerge. That is what emergence is, complex patterns arising out of simple interactions. By this definition, there actually was no emergence in this project. Nothing emerged: no tune, no rhythm, no pattern, no organization, and no structure. Instead we watched the primordial soup of life bubble for the better part of an hour while at no point did anything organic emerge.

Why? I think there are two important answers for our larger discussion about emergent dynamics in public engagement. First, as I pointed out above, the preparatory conditions were insufficient, the ensemble never

got to understand itself as an environment because they never met, the materials were not allowed to take seed nearly enough, the interactions were absent, and the timelines were too compressed. This to me is a failure to provide a sufficient manifestation of the compositional approach. I cannot see how the process that was enacted could possibly live up to the explanatory vision articulated for it. Are not the basic ingredients of emergent processes time and interactivity?

The second and more revealing reason an emergent dynamic remained aloof from this process has a layered irony to it. In a sense there was no emergence because there was too much. Or too much faith in it to be more precise, the idea that an emergent dynamic would evolve out of these high entropy conditions that were themselves established through a set of creative decisions and parameters. I suggest that what lies behind this might be thought of as an ironic resurfacing of a Modernist instinct.

The overwhelming sense I had, both myself, and, I think, the audience as well, is that during the music we were so ready and willing to ‘go’. We had sat deep inside that chaos of sound on two separate occasions for substantial intervals. Musically, this is a way of building tension, something to resolve into order.²⁷¹ All we needed was a groove to break out of that mess, a melody to soar into the rafters of that space and we would have sailed along with it. Or, to recall Kevin Kerr’s example, I kept thinking, any minute now the cougar is going to leap from the inkblot. Our brains had been working all night to find signal in the noise, certain that at some point, something is going to speak. But when it ended, and we were wrong, that there was no signal, only noise, how were we expected to feel? “There was no work here, nobody did any work here.”

Or to calibrate this in terms of Giorgio’s ambitions to use music as a means of offering a metaphor for self-world possibilities, what is the metaphor on offer in this experience? That emergent, immanent processes are really about that? That when subjective agency involves itself in the making of its worlds, that is what they look like? Indecipherable chaos born of the free masses? That is the opposite of what subjective agency does. Subjective agency, the way our situated experiencing perspective filters and organizes the world is to make patterns, to find order, even when it isn’t present. To create processes that show subjective agency amounting to nothing is not establishing any kind of phenomenology of what is at work in the world all along, but rather forcing our minds to run backwards on a treadmill for a given interval. An arbitrary, imposed way of not getting anywhere.

²⁷¹ A familiar example might be the Beatles’ *Day in the Life* where the crescendoing string sections build a mass of chaotic sound and then release, either into the skippy B section sung by Paul, or the final crash of an E major chord at the end.

5.7.2 Misplaced purity

The irony here is that, for me at least, such an approach to emergent dynamics can't help but smuggle Modernism back into the country. In wanting to preserve something free, and unencumbered, a purified approach seems to be championing a more 'naturalistic' process of music making. In other words, as much as we might explain these works as manifesting subjective agency (players and audience) do we not experience it as an absence of subjective agency? A creative gesture that continues the same determination to discover the world without us, *without* subjective agency, more of Berio's "writing music without being personally involved?"

In other words, as long as a particular process is used, its outcomes are true, regardless of the experience it offers. Or, to recall the avant-garde movements of the 1950s, this music is automaton, and it shares all the baggage of that automaton music of the 50s, except instead of coins and numbers, it used people, and given that the people involved could not manage to figure out what consequences their actions had (because the relationships were not specified) these people could exert no greater intention on an outcome than a coin.²⁷² In trying to discover a kind of immanent, emergent modality of creativity, Giorgio defaulted to a Modernist instinct to extract himself from the creative process through procedures that themselves were left to testify to the veracity of the experience.

5.7.3 A metaphor for what?

As a result we were not given a metaphor for our subjective agency as productive of our realities, because our realities are not like that. They are not lacking in meaning, order, pattern, structure, or intention. Instead of a deepened sense of subjective agency, this project left me with a cautionary tale about a maximalist faith in immanent, emergent dynamics. Employing emergent processes for their substantive gain, in other words, that they produce better results, might inspire an increasing faith in their application—the more emergent, the better. But there is a risk. That is, the risk of following deeply ingrained Modernist instincts, the belief in a purity of application to the degree that one extricates the initiating agency, the removal of what is likely the most important of the immanent components involved in the emergent dynamic. So at first blush, it felt as though this project suffered from diving too deep into a Post-Modern world, when in fact it may be more the case that it simply drifted back into Modernism without noticing.

History has not been kind to music that tries to eschew its communicative agency. The European avant-garde lost their audience to the bourgeois classics and the American avant-garde lost their audience to pop. Despite

²⁷² In fact less, as at least Cage's coins had specified implications.

a desire to illustrate radical politics with a radical aesthetic, experimental music accomplished little more than what Taruskin referred to as a new historical precedent for irrelevance. So despite the democratizing principles of Giorgio Magnanensi, their translation into music seems to leave intact and even rely on the aesthetic elitism of musical modernism, the very tradition he seemed bent on trying to escape.

If there is frustration in me towards this project it is initially that I felt the process that was designed to manifest the ideas that were espoused was radically insufficient to explore those ideas in a genuine way. But perhaps more than that, I felt that in the end, I never heard from Giorgio. Giorgio Magnanensi is a world-class composer with an enviable reputation. He writes beautiful music. So while both he and, by association, I, got wrapped up in the noble principles of emergent sound experiments, I was ultimately disappointed to realize it came at the expense of his own creative voice, surely one of the most important agencies involved in the process. In an effort to enact a thorough abdication of the autocratic role of the composer, we were denied any sort of communicative experience whatsoever. This example will yield valuable insights into the concluding discussions of emergence, experts, meaning, and agency.

Chapter 6: The Temple of the Anthropocene

6.1 Buildings or paintings?

The final commission piece for this research features new work from Derek Kaplan. Kaplan has an educational background in philosophy, painting, and architecture. He currently works for GEC Architecture based in Edmonton, Alberta, and continues to practice privately as a painter. I have known him personally and professionally for several years and know his practice as both painter and architect to involve rigorous engagement with process and meaning, as well as the larger encompassing discourse. In other words, he is deeply reflective about how he engages the creative process, what is represented by such acts, and how they connect to the larger traditions and conversations to which they belong. In this regard he shares much with the other artists involved in this research.

Unlike the other artists, however, Kaplan is proficient in two disciplines, posing the problem of which to choose when engaging the commission document. His immediate reaction to the commission saw it as a challenge of aesthetic disruption, art as a means of disrupting the status quo. This left him with an interesting dilemma. While architecture usually contains what Kaplan calls “a discourse of intervention”, the mechanisms by which it pursues such agency remain implicit to the point of invisibility. “Architecture is the water the fish swims in. Almost never is it experienced, it is just the facts of the environment that are rarely explicitly engaged.” Painting, on the other hand, suffers from the opposite problem: “Nobody’s paying attention. It’s just a function of its social relevance today. Painting is isolated in these ghettos, so in terms of speaking to people meaningfully, who is going to hear it? It seems like a dead end as a cultural discourse.” In search of that aesthetic disruption, architecture vanishes by being too close to the world in which we live, painting, by being too far removed.

This debate between such opposite invisibilities eventually fell to architecture, as the world of design²⁷³ “has to extend outwards. Even if it is not consciously engaged by anybody, even if it doesn’t have an audience that recognizes it for them, it will be something they encounter at some level. Whereas one of my paintings won’t be.” I take these statements to be less representing inherent truths of the genre and more a symptom of Kaplan’s practice and biography. He works as an architect. It is the discipline through which he engages a public, whereas painting has receded to the place of meditation, a private existence treasured and protected: “If you’ve got a sanctuary, don’t make a paycheck from it, it gets toxic.” Painting, for Kaplan, is intentionally solipsistic. Because the theme of sustainability likely entails an engagement with ‘public consciousness’, design

²⁷³ Kaplan’s term to contrast painting’s ‘world of art’

won out as the chosen medium of exploration. “I think ‘solipsistic design’ doesn’t make sense, its oxymoronic. That’s why for me to approach your set of questions through painting seems impossible. As soon as it becomes design, then I can chew on it.”

6.2 A suspicion of collaborative design

Initially I had expected this to be the case thanks to its professional customs, architecture being the one field of the four where collaborative creation is idiomatic to practice, architects are used to operating in complex collaborations. This, I thought, would be something Kaplan would avail of in engaging the commission, an added comfort with interactivity, emergence, and collaborative design. This was mistaken, as one of his earliest remarks about the commission reveals: “the first thing that jumps to my mind is design by committee, which is yet to produce anything good.” Interesting to discover that the one artist lacking a positive predisposition towards collaborative work was the one whose profession places him in such contexts as a matter of course. “Imagine if Picasso had been producing a work and each brush stroke, each movement, was decided by committee?”

Kaplan’s general negativity towards collaborative dynamics seems to range beyond the world of architecture alone, looking at distributive democracy in creative processes as something he referred to as ‘scope creep’, democratic ideals extending beyond their core purpose.

Democracy perverted into an ideology of not just political checks and balances in social organization but as a means of cultural organization and production, I think this is deeply misplaced. To me, democracy’s main virtue is negative. It negates effectively, it’s a good check and balance. But as a means of producing anything I don’t think it’s the way to go...I am not saying anything bad about community engagement or inclusion, but when you study architecture and you see projects with an almost complete forfeiture of authorship under the self-evident righteousness of distributing authorship democratically, as if this has some clear social justice virtue, and the position of someone being an author is more oppression by ‘the man’?

This remark is important not just in its contrast to positions taken by the other arts but for making explicit the latent moral argument within collaborative processes.

As we have seen there is a strong normative angle to collective processes in policy contexts, a public has a right to be engaged in producing the policies to which it must adhere. This expectation, this same sense of enfranchisement has moved into aesthetic processes rather effortlessly. We saw how much the collaborating

artists enjoyed the Electric Company process, due in large part to the open respect given to each voice. Certainly Giorgio is deeply committed to the idea of a democratic working environment, to the point of prioritizing the democracy of the creative process in favour of any concern for the aesthetic product this produces. I doubt, however, that the idea of any sort of collaborative creation even occurred to Don McKay as a means of production for poetry. The degree to which the artists embrace collaborative authorship as a self-evident virtue will be an important theme in the comparative discussion that follows this chapter.

Kaplan's skepticism of collective, emergent processes extends beyond issues of creative processes as well.

If you imagine a small-scale real world example – imagine the outcome in a consultation problem, where everyone is adamantly NIMBY. The emergent result of that inclusive process is just a bunch of people who don't want change who don't care what the thing is. Intervention creates fear...I have apprehensions with a blanket democratic assumption that emergence is going to be at the betterment of the process. And it has to do with the starting points of everyone coming into the process, and the structure around the process.

Several points can be gleaned from this quote. First, the assumption that emergent processes tend to reproduce their own values and assumptions and do not produce something beyond themselves (in other words, are neither progressive, nor, in a strict sense, emergent); Second, the characterization of the public as change-averse; And third, the distinction between unstructured processes of emergent collaboration (the blanket democratic assumption) and highly structured ones, where authorship can establish starting points and guiding structures within the process.

Kaplan illustrates this last point with an example of a highly structured application of emergent, interactive engagement:

There was a protein, the geometry of this protein was figured out by designing a game²⁷⁴, and distributing the game, people playing the game found the solution that had been elusive. But the point is, the structuring of the process, the identification of the problem, the design of the game—it is distributive processing, and that's the part that makes it inclusive and emergent—but it is very much along train tracks.

²⁷⁴ The game is called "Foldit", see <http://www.americanscientist.org/science/pub/behind-the-scenes-of-foldit-pioneering-science-gamification>

This helps gauge Kaplan's position within the 'inkblot-cougar' problem that has arisen in each of the past two chapters. Where Kerr sought a tension between the two, between the structured (cougar) and the emergent (inkblot) and Giorgio was all inkblot all the time, Kaplan clearly values a corralled relationship with emergent dynamics, where distributive processing of particular challenges is identified by a controlling authorship. In other words, emergent dynamics do not define the space of the problem, but are welcome to help solve it.

In reflecting on the previous points, I asked Kaplan if he thought emergent products within a context of rationality would always perpetuate the assumptions of that context, his response was surprisingly unequivocal, "that's exactly right." This remark clarifies Kaplan's approach to the commission: a dominant rationality is conditioned to reproduce itself upon point of disruption. Without adequate intervention, the game goes on. Connecting Kaplan's analysis to the larger interest in the relationship between sustainability and art then leads to two questions. First, what is the game? What is the dominant context of rationality that we are trying to change? And second, what forms an adequate disruption? What sort of architectural intervention might be best suited to intervene, to break up the game and alter the playing field?

In this final empirical chapter, the commission themes are taken up very much as they were with McKay, how do they manifest within a relatively private world of creative activity? Similar to McKay, Kaplan's approach to design breaks down a linear, unidirectional flow in favour of cultivating emergent, interactive relationships with his tools and materials. The result offers a compelling design proposition that lands us in the heart of art's double agency, the capacity of the aesthetic to stabilize ambiguity, or as Heidegger would say, hold forth the 'earth', thereby destabilizing us in the process.

6.3 Capitalism, lifeworlds, architecture, and sustainability

Kaplan's sense of how to situate the socio-cultural context of sustainability rests on Jürgen Habermas' idea of the lifeworld²⁷⁵ as being thoroughly colonized by capitalism.

The lifeworld being all the water we're swimming in—the institutional apparatus around us, the modes of representation, the dominant metaphors, I mean, who in their romantic relationships isn't thinking in terms of 'investment' at this point? Across the board, top to bottom it's the cost-benefit analysis approach to everything. The modes we think in, the metaphors we use, the lifeworld has been colonized by capitalism. So it is not just an economic system, it isn't just a mode of production, it has cultural and social consequences that it malignantly infiltrates.

²⁷⁵ Simply put, the lifeworld is the world in which we experience our lives, the world built out of our meanings, our histories, etc. I take it as comparable to Heidegger's 'world' in the world/earth distinction from *Origin of the Work of Art* discussed previously in the theoretical framework.

For Kaplan, definitions of value, the range of possibility, and perhaps most importantly, the structures of meaning are all infiltrated by capitalist logic. The economic rationality of maximizing profitability defines both the questions and answers involved in reflecting on living the good life, to the point of rendering alternatives nonsensical.

This is relevant to the larger project here, as any issue of large-scale change such as sustainability takes place within this larger context of rationality, a context that, according to Kaplan, is intrinsically opposed to the priorities of sustainability.

I don't think [capitalism] can exist without a selection pressure towards short-term thinking...The structural logic of sustainability requires by its nature, long term thinking. So I see a fundamental antimony between capitalism and sustainability.

Just as I had argued in my own theoretical framework, along with the commission document, that a constraining feature, or framing condition of our unsustainable society is Latour's 'Modern Constitution', Kaplan replaces this with his own analysis of Habermas' 'capitalist lifeworld'.

6.3.1 Architecture as a 'model of' and 'model for' the capitalist lifeworld

This 'colonization' becomes concrete in his assessment of modern architecture as "capitalist equipment". In discussing the range of possibility as defined by modern architecture, he says, "once you subtract everything that's not possible in the midst of those [capitalist] selection pressures, you've got modern day architectural practice. That's an incredibly small vein in terms of what's possible." Beneath this remark I imagine a professional history of trying to ask questions or pose possibilities within design contexts that were simply dismissed out of hand. Not because they miss in terms of conceptual potential, but because they land outside the purview of a capitalist lifeworld.

The corollary of this point is equally or perhaps even more important given the interests of this research. Not only does modern economic rationality produce modern architecture, but modern architecture produces modern economic rationality. Expression and worldview are locked in a recursive relationship:

What are the means by which these established patterns get reinforced and reproduced through time, as the lifeworld carries forward? I think here architecture becomes a central focus rather quickly. Look at the structure of our habitation, or the spaces we use for bureaucratic processes, business processes,

etc. Architecture functions as the built embodiment of whatever the current historical point of the lifeworld is. So that's why this point about narrating modern architecture as the reinvention of capitalist equipment only exacerbates this point about biasing us towards short-termism.

Capitalist short-termism determines the built environment and the built environment furthers the self-evidence of capitalist short-termism.

6.3.2 Designed intervention

Therefore, Kaplan's proposition on how architecture might contribute to sustainability has little to do with better lightbulbs, more efficient climate controls, or low impact building materials. Instead of pushing further into green architecture's efficiency gains, Kaplan's approach is instead an aesthetic response to this recursive relationship between design and worldview.

The idea is to create a moment of disruption in existing lifeworld patterns. Then within the gap that follows, as the established patterns lose momentum, lose self-evidence, if you set the conditions right, then an emergent process can yield new patterns that are more conducive to sustainability.

This approach follows the protein-game's relationship with emergent dynamics described above. Build the entity according to the vision of a purposive authorship and let the emergent interactivity happen in accordance with the specified affordances of the space. The building, in other words, is the train tracks. If the diagnosis of the colonized lifeworld is correct, and the notion of disruption via design is appropriate, *and* aesthetic engagement is what this research assumes it to be—a relevant agent in the production and maintenance of contextual rationality—then emergent processes *might* be useful. In other words, a given context might avoid regurgitating the world it knew.

This is obviously a much more linear assertion than we have seen so far, one that may expose itself to a certain vulnerability. Is such a singular diagnosis of sustainability as 'the modern lifeworld colonized by capitalism' correct? Secondly, can a singular vision of design be expected to form an effective aesthetic disruption for a population—can an artistic gesture 'mean' what it is intended to mean?

To be fair, these two questions—diagnosis and prescription—are vulnerabilities for every aspect of this research, my own commissioning premises (however different from Kaplan's analysis) along with each work created as an intentional act responding to such premises in a particular way. In a different sense, Kaplan's approach is unique in that it engages a very separate issue (capitalism) than the other works (subject-object

dynamics) and targets that issue in a highly specified manner, design a disruption of that conceptual framework such that different lifeworld possibilities have a chance to surface. In this regard he has taken on a much more concrete and instrumental agenda than the works that remained more exploratory in nature.

6.3.3 Culture jamming in the capitalist lifeworld

An important critique to have in mind in this regard is not concerned with aesthetic agency in particular, but more with the mechanism of counter-cultural gestures aimed at capitalist societies. Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter's work *The Rebel Sell* (2004) illustrates the strong tendency to elide consumerist culture with mass society, where one is driven by individualism, the compulsion to distinguish ourselves via consumption, and the other is built on a drive towards conformity.

As the authors illustrate, however, consumerism is typically and erroneously vilified as a form of conformism. What passes as a critique of consumerism is in fact a critique of mass society. The irony being that "the critique of mass society has been one of the most powerful forces driving consumerism for more than forty years." It is the compulsion to distinguish ourselves from mass society that helps capitalism keep ruling the world.

What we need to see is that consumption is not about conformity, it's about distinction. People consume in order to set themselves apart from others. To show that they are cooler (Nike shoes), better connected (the latest nightclub), better informed (single-malt Scotch), morally superior (Guatemalan handcrafts), or just plain richer (BMW's).²⁷⁶

From this, one gets the image of individuality as a battle with entropy, difference as a far-from-equilibrium state, where equilibrium is the point at which we reach a kind of generic homogeneity. Consumerism is the by-product of a determination to maintain our negentropic state: once a commodity can no longer distinguish, its use-value expires. The pace of such expiration can be manipulated, it is a cultural rather than natural phenomenon in that advertising and image manipulation can 'expire' a pair of boots faster than we can actually wear them out.

Such language is not meant to explain away Kaplan's analysis of a lifeworld colonized by capitalism but rather demonstrate a mechanism by which his claim operates. However, the double-edge of this mechanism cautions rebellious efforts aimed at the capitalist lifeworld. Given the argument that capitalism is driven by

²⁷⁶ Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter. "The Rebel Sell" in *This* Magazine. Available online at <http://this.org/magazine/2002/11/01/the-rebel-sell/>. November, 2002.

distinction not conformism, much cultural production refuting the dominance and legitimacy of capitalism turns out to accelerate the momentum of this lifeworld. Heath and Potter identify ostensible symbols of disruption, publications like Adbusters magazine or Naomi Klein's *No Logo*, as recipients of the precise momentum they propose to resist. Hence the subtitled of *The Rebel Sell*: "*Why the Culture Can't be Jammed*."

I raise the concern here as something to keep in mind before exploring Kaplan's architectural proposal as an attempt to disrupt the momentum of the capitalist lifeworld. The extraordinary tenacity and resilience of capitalism may be in part due to its capacity to colonize its rebellions, its knack for selling anti-capitalism. However, exploring the 'true capacity' of the designed space to 'jam the culture' will remain conjectural throughout this discussion as this response to the commission is unique from the other three in that it itself remains conjectural. Where the previous commissions were able to become fully-developed examples of their genre, the poetry ended up published by McClelland and Stewart, the play was produced in Vancouver and remounted a year later for a month-long run, and the music performance was presented to a listening public, in the case of architecture, we obviously had neither the time nor budget to build the space and engage with how it was used, or what it came to signify in the public consciousness.

Therefore the project was taken by Kaplan as an opportunity to imagine 'what if?' What sort of architectural space might be a particularly potent response to his analysis of the sustainability problem? Without concern for what would be feasible, without worrying about client or user needs, but just focusing on design aspects of architecture in some purist sense, what *should* be built at this point in history?

6.4 Present for forever

6.4.1 Beyond the paradigm

The relationship between sustainability and architecture is a strong one. Building design and engineering remains a vital area of lowering material impacts on the environment, a challenge taken very seriously within the design world, as significant strides have been made to change how we design buildings over the past few decades. There is, after all, no LEED certification for poetry, theatre, or music.

Kaplan articulates the typical range of architectural engagement with sustainability:

Standard "green" procedure formulates what architecture can offer sustainability in the terms of energy efficiency, recycled building materials, renewable energy sources, life cycle costs, material embodied

energy, urban density and economies of scale, revised patterns of habitation and transportation, spaces for localized production of necessities like potable water, urban gardening/farming, etc.

However, for Kaplan, this list illustrates his larger argument that the issue of sustainability remains broached within the larger context of capitalist rationality. “These bracketed lines of problem-solving respond to questions that are structured by the conceptual foundations of modern architecture, in which design possibility is defined by a functional positivism that prioritizes system optimization above all else.” In other words, ‘green design’ has been equated almost exclusively with building performance.

The goal of this commission was to free artists to think into and beyond their inner logic of their practices, what Kaplan took as an invitation to find “architectural possibilities that are difficult destinations to access through the logic of modern architecture.” Or, in my own terms, can we explore what a building ‘says’ about sustainability in addition to what it ‘does’. Beyond the often hidden elements of building systems, what can design itself say about sustainability?

6.4.2 Finding the leverage point

Given that this project existed in the land of pure conjecture, not only is it free to imagine itself beyond the rationalities and priorities of its discipline, but it can also choose its ideal purpose. Kaplan was not developing a proposal for a real client obviously, and so he was free to situate this exploration in whatever application he wished. What is the best thing a building can be used for in trying to engender a more sustainable world? “What is the highest leverage point that a single work of architecture could address? It would be the global environmental summits. There you have the most concentration of power and decision making leverage at those points.”²⁷⁷

Most such summits occur in places that, according to Kaplan, establish an “exact reinforcement of established patterns, institutional processes, [thereby] facilitating business as usual.” Kaplan describes a “continuity” between contexts that further the short-termism of unsustainable practices, and those that are trying to change course from within them. He proposes instead to

²⁷⁷ I question whether a concentration of leaders is as effective a leverage point as Kaplan assumes but will leave a discussion of the issue for further on.

create a space that is fundamentally other. So there is no association with [the larger contextual rationality], no clear way to occupy it, no familiar desk, your iPhone doesn't work there, and you have an extended arrival sequence, you're not in the middle of New York, it's inconvenient to get to.

Facilities that seek to offer a retreat from one's life are common, this proposal takes the idea a step further, seeking a retreat from one's lifeworld. In other words an effort to create a meaningful pause from the momentum of not just one's own life, but as much of the surrounding context of one's life as well.

6.5 The GCC Commission: *A Point Subtracted*

The transformation of these ideas into an architectural proposal was presented to the public in a multi-media installation at the Centre for Interactive Research into Sustainability, UBC in late March of 2012. The installation featured expository sections that provided background on the project, a discussion of its theoretical framework (some of which has been quoted here), along with engineering dimensions of the proposal, historical precedents, and displays of the experimental processes that led to the ultimate design. The final design itself featured animated digital renderings projected onto multiple screens. This gave one the 'experience' of walking towards the 'building', going inside it, departing, or simply remaining there as sunlight moved across the exterior, lighting the space inside.

6.5.1 Resurrection of the tomb

What then, was this design? How had Kaplan distilled his ideas of design, sustainability, capitalism, and environmental summits into an architectural proposition?

The proposal begins by resurrecting the possibility of large-scale rock-cut architecture by means of a technological update to its method of production, using currently existing technology. It is not a general concept for rock-cut architecture as a material means of producing our cities. Rather it is for the production of *one very specific piece of architecture* that is currently absent: a venue for future global environmental summits that is fundamentally *other*, a space removed from every context mapped by standardized habits—to offer an architectural starting point for addressing the fundamental antinomy between sustainability and the lifeworld as structured by capitalism.

In brief, taking advantage of a variety of new technological capacities, to be explored shortly, Kaplan's proposition is an eco-conference centre hewn out of the side of a mountain.²⁷⁸

Admittedly I had not even realized that rock cut architecture had ever been a style of building, so the resurrection of the practice as a response to the commission was surprising. Yet it aligns very well with Kaplan's analysis of the problem. Rock cut architecture is represented today by relatively ancient examples of spiritual sites—tombs, temples, shrines—in places like Turkey, India, Jordan, etc. "It once took a huge expenditure of human labour and long periods of time to develop, not possible anymore. And why did they do it? To take something that they held so dear that they wanted to eternalize it... Send it into the indefinitely long future." In other words, a way of building that is itself a meditation on forever. Thus, there can be no greater contrast to Kaplan's accusation of modern architecture's 'short-termism' than rock cut architecture, a proposition framed by the question, "what would you send into forever?"

While the style itself may seem antiquated—a vague hybrid of sculpture and cave-dwelling—the proposition to resurrect the style is in fact based on the application of contemporary technologies. Advances in geology greatly enhance our capacity to choose a site:

You look at Petra in Jordan, Kailash in India, and the execution is amazing, but it's lifeless stone, dead, grey, no texture, so you ... see how important your initial site selection is. We know now more than ever where the beautiful stone is.

More sophisticated industrial techniques of blasting and the use of high-powered automated drills allow the space to be opened and shaped much faster than human hands once managed. Kaplan had illustrated this with several information boards in the exhibit. This along with advances in structural engineering open up new design possibilities. "We know the properties of stone better than ever. We have the ability to model in an engineering sense forms and structures that would be left from a rock mass." This addresses what he saw as a prior limit of rock cut architecture, the highly restricted design possibility, "a dark cave with an ornate façade."

6.5.2 High-tech interactivity

While Kaplan explicitly eschewed collaborative, emergent dynamics between himself and other people, his design process itself relied on them fundamentally. Here, however, his interlocutors were his own design

²⁷⁸ Kaplan has developed his own website profiling the project, with digital images and short video clips give one a virtual tour of certain aspects of the space: <http://apointsubtracted.blogspot.ca/>

instincts, the material ingredients he was working with (in this case the stone of the rock mass and sunlight), and design software used to facilitate the interactivity between ingredients.

'Parametric modeling' was the name I was given to describe this new digital modeling capacity. Kaplan described it as follows:

Imagine you've got a circle, with boxes positioned around the circle. Normally, in 3D modeling software, that configuration is just geometry sitting in space. If I want to change something about it, like the number of cubes, or their spacing around the circle, or their orientation, I have to do it manually, because none of the relationships between those aspects are defined. In parametric software, all those relationships are defined, so it is not just geometry sitting in Euclidean space. If I want to change the spacing of the cubes or their relationship to the circle, or their orientation, somewhere in the definition of that cube, variables exist that set those conditions. Instead of manually going in and repositioning it, in parametric software I go into the definition, find the variable and change it.

This capacity to mimic relationships strikes me as the essence of digital interactivity. If the software was unable to establish these relationships, the interactions between the different components would have to be remodelled one by one.

6.5.3 The agency of the inanimate

One of the most striking features of Kaplan's design was an ornate series of holes drilled up through the surface of the rock mass, all pointing in different angles (see figures 6.2-6.4) . "The thing that I was driving towards was a way of avoiding the interior baking in direct sunlight but have it day lit anytime that it is light outside." Therefore the arrangement of these different holes, or what Kaplan referred to as 'light chimneys' had to be precisely arranged such that it tunnelled sunlight into the space throughout the day as the sun moved, yet never allow the sunlight to be too direct. From a design perspective this involved endless tinkering with different lighting strategies, something only possible with the kind of interactive relationships the design software enabled:

If I want to reposition a light chimney and had only dumb geometry at my disposal, the size of the headache would make such improvisation prohibitive. Because it's parametric, I can do that quickly, which means I can iteratively test what the sunlight does, and if I don't like it, I can tune the definition to yield a form that yields a further surprise. One I can further develop or reject and restart.

One gets the sense of the inanimate elements, stone and sunlight taking on an agency within the design process, an agency they previously lacked, all but mute ingredients in the pre-parametric modeling era. Now they can step into a conversation as dynamic discussants able to represent their qualities in an articulate manner.

I suggested this sort of digital processing was really just an analogue process sped up, but Kaplan disagreed:

I find it to be a difference in kind with the tools we have at our disposal now. They are able to foster an emergent dynamic based on their capacity to manage such complexity. Imagine how many physical models would have been used to discover what this software could show me in a few hours?

In other words, given the amount of experimentation that it affords, this was not an old practice grown more efficient but instead, an entirely new possibility for design.

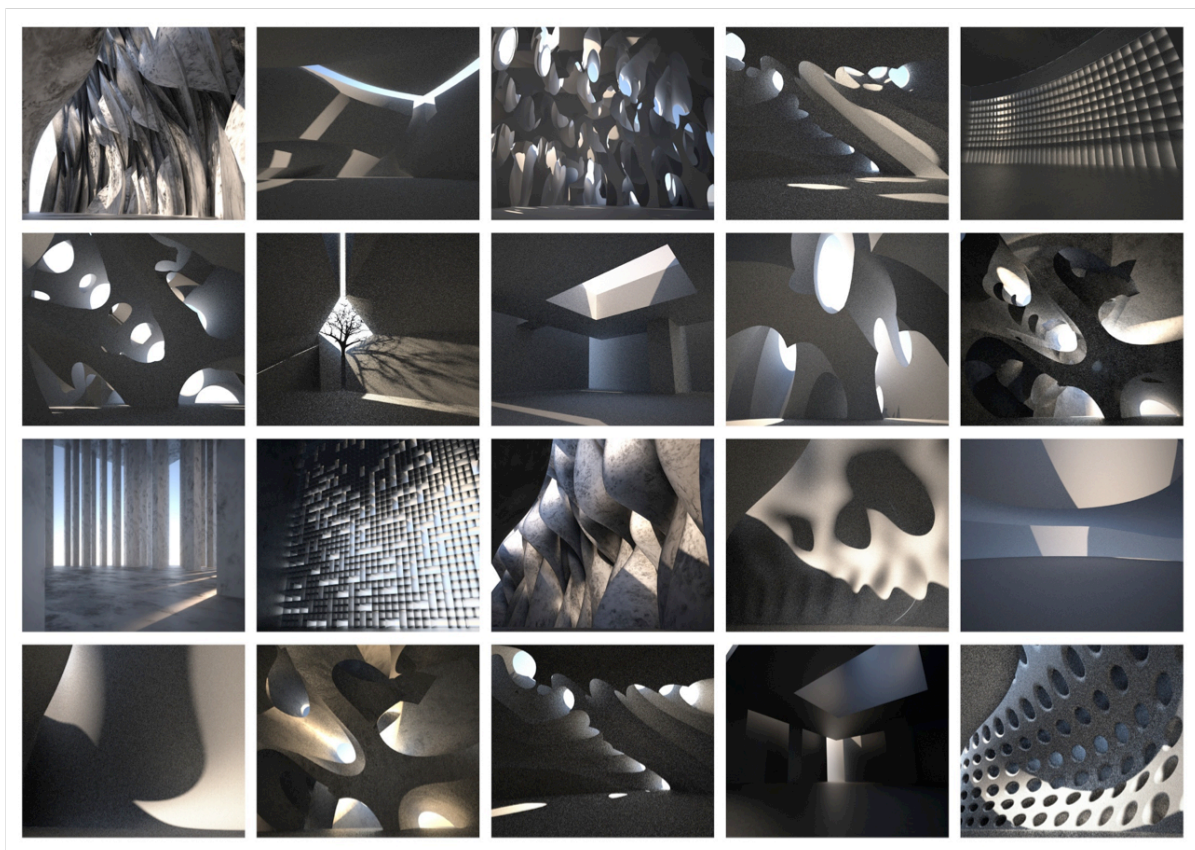


Figure 6.1 A selection of Kaplan's variations on the interaction between design, stone and light.

We were given a sense of the responsive, reactive dynamic the approach required through an image Kaplan presented in the installation showing “just a few” different possible solutions to the lighting inside the space. Kaplan describes this process as endlessly surprising.

I had so many false starts with this, all these examples I had imagined bright porosity. The whole play of light was such a surprising exploration, where I thought I would get one thing, and it wasn't that at all. The only reason I could confirm it wasn't what I would have expected was because of these tools I have right now. To me, from a practicing designer perspective, that's the most interesting part of the story, the emergent dynamic between me and the design. So often what I expected to be the result, wasn't. I could confirm that, I could test it. We have the possibilities...that we've never had before, and this is an essay in that.

Given how much enthusiasm Kaplan displayed for the collaborative, emergent dynamics present between himself, his computer, the stone, and the light, it further clarified that his dismissal of emergent processes was not so much epistemological, not a rejection of interactivity as a way of finding things out; but more political, a rejection of these dynamics as they exist within a group of human actors characterized by power dynamics.

This calls to mind the discussion between Kevin Kerr, David Hudgins, and Kim Collier of the Electric Company regarding how much they had tinkered with precisely this element. The politics of collaborative creation. The constant need to revisit and revise the strategies that enable collaborative creation to remain a positive force. Each project had to have its emergent dynamics structured in a particular way, and at a fundamental level the creators had to work constantly to maintain a dynamic of trust and respect for that particular mode of creation to remain palatable. It was, in other words, an active management of power and the problems it can bring to collaborative dynamics. In the world of architecture, interactive, collaborative design may be common, but I question whether the same amount of reflexive engagement goes into managing it?

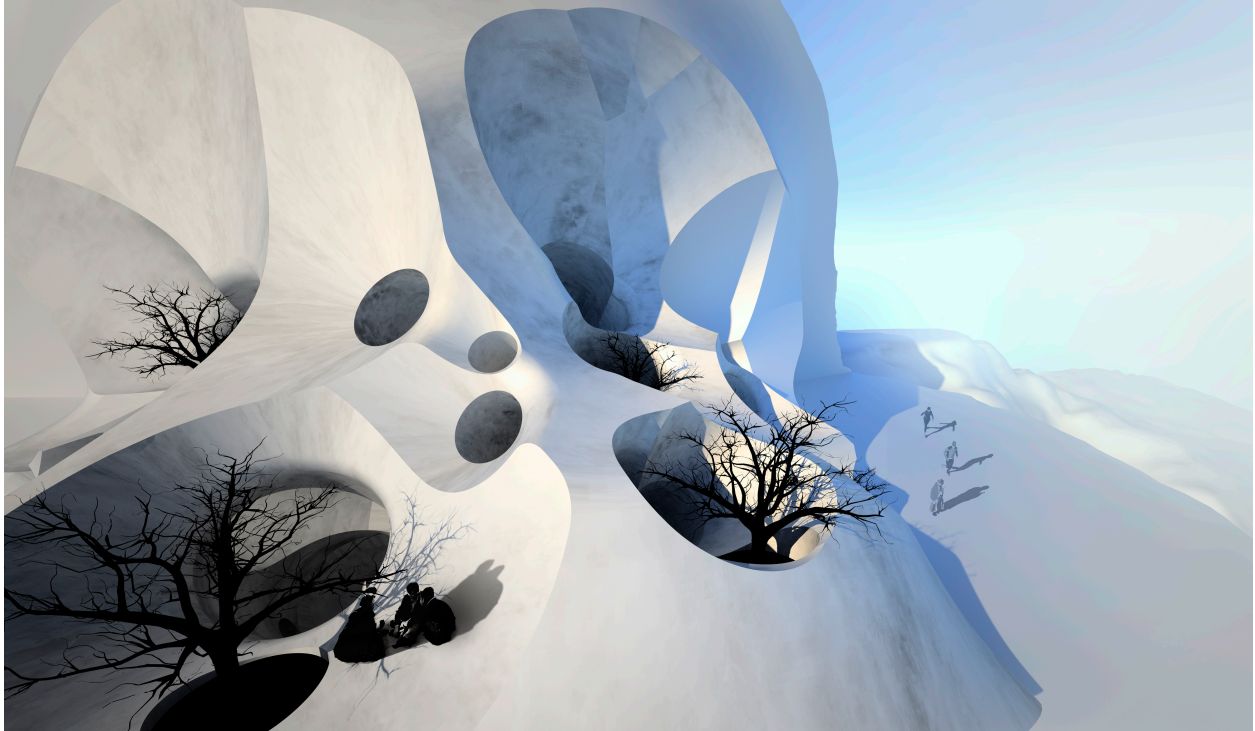


Figure 6.2 The exterior of Kaplan's design showing figures sitting on its surface, and heading towards the entrance

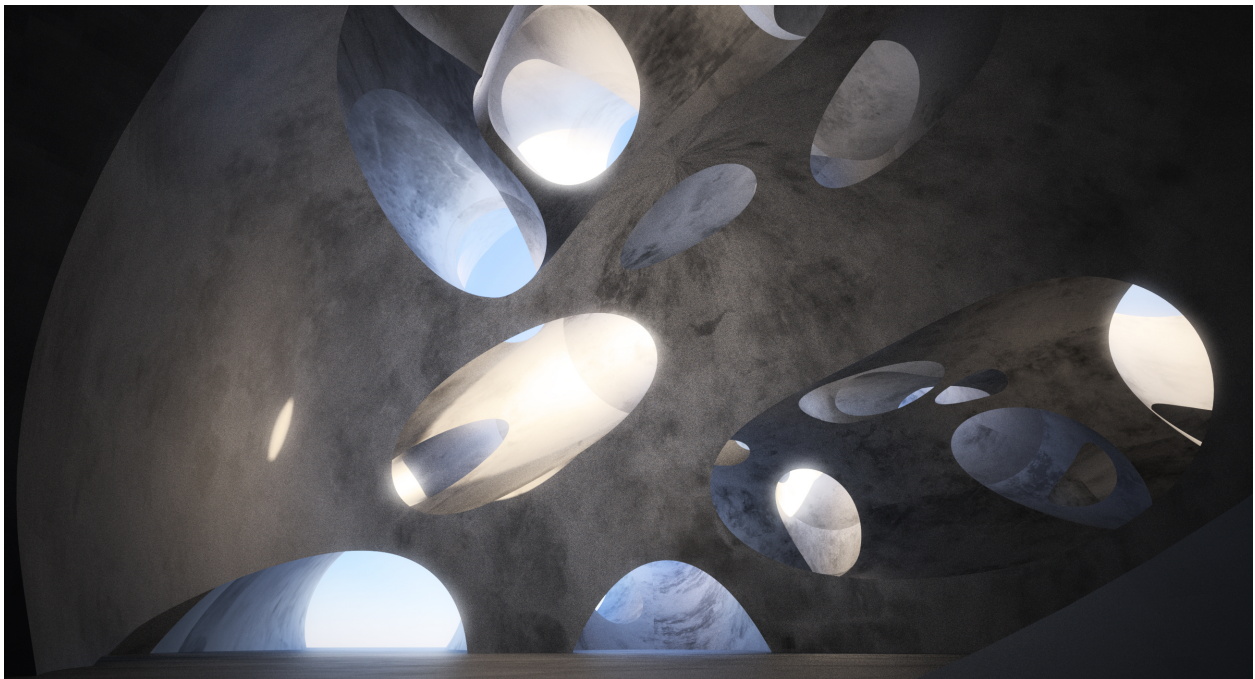


Figure 6.3 The space viewed from the interior at one point in the day. Throughout the course of the day the brightest light chimney would shift with the course of the Sun.



Figure 6.4 The interior at a different time of day

6.6 A paradox of the sustainable world

Kaplan set out to forge a relationship between architectural design and sustainability that sidestepped interest in building technologies and systems optimization to a place where, as he describes it, “value leads function, instead of function leading value.” This obviously resonates deeply with the approach to sustainability entailed in this research, where previously ‘function’ was read as ‘fact’ and the effort was to abandon the ‘facts corral values’ approach to sustainability. Architecturally, the result of this approach brings to the surface key themes in the relationship of this research to sustainability in general. From an aesthetic perspective, what ‘speaks’ sustainability to us? How do we narrate and symbolize it to ourselves?

As we have seen, Kaplan’s engagement with sustainability was linear and explicit: Sustainability is a struggle against a lifeworld colonized by the priorities of capitalism and the short-term thinking it engenders, necessitating a targeted interruption of the self-evident, axiomatic nature of this ‘reality’. Why then did he not save himself the trouble of designing such a complex proposal and simply sketch out an architect’s version of a log cabin in the woods or a cob house? Either is already a loaded symbol of a rejection of the present lifeworld. Even more to this point, why pursue an architectural vision that carries the application of technological and industrial development to its furthest reach if one’s encompassing desire is to interrupt the momentum that drives such development?

In this there seems an echo of the same forces we saw haunting musical modernism in the 20th century. Could it be that we all imagine with some kind of ‘historical priority’ at heart? That riding the edge of human ‘advancement’ is the only way to cultivate an organic response to the world in which we live? It is, in other words, an immanent engagement, taking up the materials at hand, the tools of present context, and trying to find the next possible thing they might say?

For me, this is one of the more alluring points of engagement with the dilemma of sustainability. This, as I see it, is its essential paradox. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say I view the crisis of sustainability as a paradox, rather than just a difficult situation. This paradox is the juxtaposition of our collapsing sense of mastery over our world and our fate, amidst historically unprecedented levels of material agency. Kaplan brings this acutely to light with this design proposal. As stated earlier, this project was borne out of the burgeoning digital age; it is an exploration of newfound capacity. Yet simultaneously, it is utterly absent of technology. “From an architectural perspective, the premises I set reduce it to two elemental features...stone and light.” How best to understand a project that results from parametric design software, advances in geological science, and high-tech industrial excavation processes, and yet incorporates nothing that would be unrecognizable to a neolithic biped? What story does the development of a space like this tell?

Not surprisingly, in trying to answer this question I went looking for the double agency of art discussed in previous chapters, the capacity to both infiltrate and undermine an encompassing rationality. Either implicitly or explicitly Kaplan accepts the compulsion to enchant the modern imagination (especially his own), playing into our love affair with our increasing technological command over our realities. It is then that possibility and ideology begin the dance of what could and should be said next, yielding this complex symbol of both our present digital and industrial capacity blurred into a rejection of their encompassing values, a full-fledged retreat from their seemingly inexhaustible momentum.

6.7 Logistical difficulties of the double agent

I have argued that such double agency was indigenous to the arts, an idiom within Western societies in which we are well-disposed towards both accepting and rejecting, celebrating and critiquing present circumstances. Yet perhaps the license and limitations of this duplicity grow clearer when pursued through the variation of architecture and the ‘reality’ of buildings. As a public destination with real users, the capacity to step outside the lifeworld seems more difficult. For example, part of the ‘lifeworld interruption’ of the proposal rests on its physical seclusion from this world. Therefore other facilities would have to be built directly adjacent to it with washrooms, food, transportation, accommodations, and other amenities in order for it to be able to cater to a public.

So the temple needs a manse, a bridge or portal in and out of the lifeworld it is attempting to exclude. The agency of this exclusion, how much it really manages to exclude, or in Kaplan's terms, how effective a disruption it manages to be, may have as much to do with the qualities of the bridge leading into it as with the features it possesses itself. Balancing this exclusion with the capacity to engage the public strikes me as a delicate issue. How much can a place actually exist outside the lifeworld it depended on to produce it? This question sets the stakes for an architectural pursuit of sustainability such as this, for without a carefully composed solution we may have to return to efficiency gains instead. I am reminded of the present day site built around the caves of Lascaux, where the ancient cave is surrounded by a high tech facility aimed at managing public use. The goal here seems to be to preserve the purity of the ancient site, yet create a functional interface with its public. I have only explored the site online (through an elaborate virtual tour), but in doing so found myself struggling to find and feel the world of the paintings themselves.²⁷⁹ In other words, that ancient lifeworld seems thoroughly colonized by our own, it did not seem to survive as wholly/holy other, and seemingly purely for logistical reasons. Where do we park? Where can we eat? Where do we use the bathroom? Are there exit signs visible from all locations?

A more egregious example of this I find in what has always struck me as the ugliest place in Canada: Niagara Falls, Ontario, ironically enough. This natural wonder attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists every year, with the unfortunate result of such a total colonization of the immediate surroundings by the crudest examples of lifeworld capitalism, McDonald's, a huge casino, a giant Hershey Bar, etc. A habitation so seemingly at odds with its setting (yet one that seems clearly emergent in its developmental logic).

How Kaplan's design proposes to reconcile this crucial balance between being able to attract the public into an other-worldliness while at the same time attending to their needs is absent from the proposal. Why the arts are so given to such duplicity might be answered by the fact that it usually only has to accomplish its critique, its betrayal, between covers or curtains. This challenge strikes me—a total novice in exploring architectural proposals—to be a much more complex constraint within the development of a building. Nonetheless it is a crucial element in the defense of this proposal as a functional interruption of the lifeworld. If unusable its agency is nil. If too easily accessed, colonization by the lifeworld it was striving to neutralize seems inevitable, greatly reducing its agency in the opposite direction. So evaluating how well design matches desire, how much this proposal actually interrupts its lifeworld depends very much on a litany of questions unexplored in the present proposal. All that is to say, I am left craving a greater sense of how the project proposes to develop its duplicity, to be both of, and absent of, its surrounding context.

²⁷⁹ Available online at: <http://www.fastcodesign.com/1672045/a-cavernous-museum-designed-for-17000-year-old-cave-paintings#1>

This also returns us to the questions raised in the discussion of *The Rebel Sell*. Will such an elite and exclusive space genuinely neutralize (to whatever degree) capitalist momentum? Or will it thrive on and enhance the spirit of capitalist swagger in its capacity to transcend human and natural limitations in the establishment of a truly distinguishing retreat facility? Most high-cost resort-style getaways are extreme manifestations of Potter and Heath's thesis, they are a primary means by which we distance ourselves from the conformist lifeworld, and in doing so, drive that lifeworld forward ever more aggressively. The more exclusive, the more the site offers a culturally negentropic sensation, and the more it quickens capitalism's pulse, that human compulsion to distinguish ourselves from mass society. In questioning what sort of future this hypothetical design proposition might have were it built, we might ask what role the existing rock cut architecture sites play in their cultural fabric. Are they not strong drivers of cultural tourism now? A keystone in the capitalist structure of their context? One might have to argue that not despite, but perhaps *because* of the lengths that Kaplan has gone to escape the architectural language of modernism, he might have succeeded in creating something truly useful to the capitalist lifeworld, a new way for us to distinguish ourselves.

Kaplan seemed unperturbed at the suggestion that his 'interruption thesis' might void itself in some way:

Would it work? Would it create disruption? Would it create a window of opportunity that allows for other patterns to emerge? My response is that is the wrong question, and one that precipitates out of the same premises of functionality.

In other words, the experimental nature of this research along with the art it has commissioned all deserves reprieve from such utilitarian demands for now at least. Instead of trying to defend its capacity to be transformative, for as Kaplan says "the most critical point is the symbolic value. Imagine if this was built. What would it say to future generations?" Yet given function is symbol in this case, the response seems circular. Its capacity to disrupt rests on what it comes to symbolize, so to ask what it symbolizes is to interrogate its intended function.

6.8 Sustainability as a hole punched in the Earth?

Here we enter a more interpretive realm trying to assess what this proposal would symbolize were it to be built, in other words, furthering that question of what 'speaks' sustainability to modern, Western mind. My initial interpretive instinct with this design branches off in two distinct directions, one immediate, perhaps more superficial, though perhaps problematic for the proposal itself, the other, more complexly entangled with the initiating ideas of the commission.

It is important to remember that this commission gave the opportunity to think architectural thoughts about sustainability beyond engineering and building systems. It was a desire to see issues of design emerge as the main front of inquiry. As a result, Kaplan ended up developing a complex proposal to shape a space out of rock. There is no construction here in the typical sense, no wiring, no plumbing, no energy, no waste, rather, as he said, an essay in the interaction of stone and light. Thus the space is perhaps less building and more sculpture. In that case, trying to figure out what this space would mean to people, that is, how it might be interpreted and understood symbolically, has a lot to do with the categorical lens through which it is viewed.²⁸⁰ In this regard the design has more in common with the large-scale industrial Land Art projects of the 1970s as with green buildings of the early 21st century.

This is likely not a comparison Kaplan would welcome. The reputation of this style of earth sculpting has been called into question more recently as “much Environmental and/or Land Art of the 1960s and 1970s involved tremendous imposition on the land and eco-systems, such as Michael Heizer’s *Double Negative*, where 244,800 tonnes of earth was moved to form the land itself into a sculpture.”²⁸¹ Similarly, Kaplan’s proposal obviously entails a huge amount of blasting, drilling, and other highly invasive engagement to shape the landscape according to design specifications. This issue was not discussed in the proposal but was raised by several people who explored the installation.

Land Art practices have been criticized from a variety of perspectives. The ecofeminist critique has characterized the work as “masculine gestures’ in nature,”²⁸² consistent with a larger narrative of domination and exploitation. In *Balance: Art and Nature* (1994), a text exploring environmental art very broadly defined, author John Grande refers to this phase of Land Art as ‘ego-centric’ rather than ‘eco-centric’. One interview I conducted with someone that viewed Kaplan’s installation was quite positive about the concept all around, but did add: “It is also a bit megalomaniacal—I am going to carve out a volcano... the evil layer, ‘where do I launch my missiles from?’”

6.8.1 The semiotics of *Spiral Jetty*

²⁸⁰ See Kendall Walton’s arguments that engagement with a work begins with the features that are standard to it thereby determining the category in which it is interpreted (a painting’s ‘flatness’, for example leads us to approach it *as a painting*). The meaning of a work’s content depends crucially on this first categorizing instinct. Kendall Walton. “Categories of Art.” *The Philosophical Review*. Vol. 79, no. 3. July, 1970.

²⁸¹ Beth Carruthers, “Praxis: Acting as if Everything Matters.” 2006. 16. Available online at: <http://www.culturalcurrency.ca/PraxisFinal.pdf>.

²⁸² Emily Brady (1998) and Stephanie Ross (1998) in *IO Internet Magazine*. Quoted in Carruthers, 2006.

Perhaps the most famous example of large scale industrial Land Art is Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, undeniably a great imposition on the landscape, pushing 7000 tons of rock out into a Utah lake (likely insignificant in comparison to Kaplan's proposal). Yet the creation was not without its ecological intent, even sensitivity, one might argue. Smithson suggested in an interview that *Spiral Jetty* was intended to both withstand and be "intimately involved with the climate changes and natural disturbances" of the site.²⁸³ The sculpture height is such that it submerges and surfaces depending on natural phenomena, rain, drought, and mountain snowpack. This responsiveness to natural dynamics (particularly those occurring far away in the mountains) translates interactions that are likely invisible to most of us into an immediate cultural form. I see an obvious comparison here to Kaplan's proposal, where the space creates a performance out of sunlight as it moves through the complex array of light chimneys, dramatically illuminating the interior.

Further similarities to Kaplan's proposal was Smithson's choice of site and work as an abandonment of his own lifeworld, in this case understood as that of the contemporary art world centered in New York. A description of Smithson's own film about *Spiral Jetty* clarifies his intent: "the viewer is meant to be unable to categorize or classify the site, and will be left in a state free from the dialectic of history." Again the theme of lifeworld interruption resonates with Kaplan's piece.

Smithson died in 1973 just three years after *Spiral Jetty* was complete. Shortly thereafter, water levels rose and the piece would lie submerged for the next three decades, re-emerging in the early 2000s.²⁸⁴ Despite Smithson's own remarks about an interest in entropy, in the natural processes of decay, recent efforts have sought to preserve the work as, according to the president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, "a significant cultural site" (New York Times, 2008). A further twist to the work's symbolic meaning and value came recently when oil drilling was proposed nearby and Utah's public land policy coordinating office was inundated with emails, letters and phone messages protesting the proposal based on its proximity to the Jetty.²⁸⁵ So is this an invasive imposition compromising the natural integrity of the landscape? Or a cultural artifact that has led to the valuation of a part of the natural world that would otherwise likely go unvalued? This helps to show how complex and unstable the semiotics of sustainability inevitably are. Even the meaning of this forty-year old legendary piece of Land Art is as unstable as the climate with which it is meant to interact.

²⁸³ "Documenting Spiral Jetty" *The Getty Conservation Institute*. June, 2010. Available online at http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/videos/focus/spiral_jetty.html

²⁸⁴ Utah Museum of Fine Arts. "On the Road to Spiral Jetty." Available online at: <http://umfa.utah.edu/spiraljetty>. Accessed March 22, 2014.

²⁸⁵ Randy Kelly. "Artists Rally to Save Spiral Jetty." *The New York Times*. February 6, 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/06/arts/06arts-ARTISTS-RALLY_BRF.html?_r=0. Accessed March 22, 2014.

Despite a negative view of high impact Land Art being au courant, there are those willing to suggest such an opinion may be critically incomplete. Critic Brian Wallace, (quoted in Carruthers, 2006), emphasizes the inadequacy of the account typically given such works. He states "...aesthetic descriptions [of monumental earthworks] failed to acknowledge the complex relationships between the earthworks and the social and biological context of the desert".¹ Wallace emphasizes the need to encounter these works "in situ". As Carruthers says "these works call for and require an embodied experience and that, through such embodied experience, one comes by way of the art to gain a renewed experience of the place." The attention generated by *Spiral Jetty* certainly supports this counter argument.

Generally, I defer to Carruthers read of the larger critique of this period of Land Art:

From our view some thirty plus years on, many do seem insensitive and uncaring with respect to the way they interact with environment... These artists, for all their stated intentions of pulling away from a Modernist framework, remained products of mid- to late twentieth century Western culture, and while the works might represent the beginnings of a move away from these cultural norms, even if one assesses them charitably, they remain problematic in their treatment of environment as mere material or medium.

To this I would only add the question of how much the predominant rejection of Land Art rests on a purified notion of the 'natural'. If one pushed 7000 tons of stone out into the East River would there be the same squeamishness? Once we divide landscapes into natural *or* cultural do we exert different principles on what has value? Should we not? *Spiral Jetty* reminds me of the almost amusing adventure of Don McKay's rocking chair rocking back and forth across the ever-shifting boarder separating our conception of what symbolizes cultural and what natural, how we locate that in our artifacts, and how that shifts estimations of value and our semiotic response.

Kaplan is proposing a highly invasive process to create a facility that is not independently functional as a building, but more an aesthetic statement. Does it deserve tarring with the same brush that has recently blackened the reputation of 1970s Land Art? From a symbolic perspective, this brief summary of *Spiral Jetty* suggests that any assumptions we might make of what Kaplan's proposal might represent to 'the public' are hopelessly inadequate, particularly if we accept Wallace's argument that an embodied experience of the space is essential to processing the meaning of any given site. Returning to an instrumental perspective of such gestures, perhaps they belong on the same pile as the atmospheric CO2 generated by the thousands of participants in annual climate change meetings? A little harm aimed at a larger good? Either way, conjectural semiotics appears to be a fraught enterprise.

6.9 The Temple of the Anthropocene

Spiral Jetty demonstrates the incoherence of the antiquated boundary trying to distinguish the natural from the cultural. In the theoretical framework proposed for this research, Latour's 'Modern Constitution' marks the assembly of the great wall of Modernism separating the two domains. As was argued in that early chapter, sustainability might signify the ultimate collapse of this metaphysical organizing principle. The larger imaginative challenge implicit in so much sustainability work is whether we are able to imagine our world without dividing it into natural and cultural categories *a priori*. How do we see in hybrid colour? How does an encounter instinctually read as some imprecise blend of 'natural' objective properties and subjective 'cultural' ones? Rather than asking 'what is that object?' can we learn to ask, 'what is this encounter?'

This hybridity, this reality built of natural and cultural properties, objective, and subjective agencies, has perhaps its most extravagant calibration in the relatively recent proposition of the Anthropocene. This theoretical nomination views humanity as the dominant force shaping the material circumstances of our planet, pushing the nature-culture boundary further out the door and making the imaginative, existential challenge of this proposition that much more urgent. In the words of pioneering environmentalist Stewart Brand, "we are as gods, and we'd better get good at it."²⁸⁶ Learning to inhabit our place in a world where we are the predominant influence on the balance of planetary systems implies a huge existential shift, one for which we have precious few metaphors.

So what of this recent architectural proposition? This carved-out stone temple of light? Where does it take our imagination? Into a triumph of cultural progress? Into a pastoral reverie of natural purity? Or somewhere in between? In looking at the smoothed, rounded surfaces of the chamber, made porous with long cylindrical holes reaching into the sky, I can imagine that with the right tidal action, and boulders of suitable density, the winds and waves might have carved this themselves. And yet there is just enough precision, enough geometry and intention catering to the experience, that it seems almost space age. Little wonder it seems vulnerable to simultaneous charges of industrial Land Art (abused nature) and impractical uselessness (decadent culture).

Such hybridity braves immediate dismissal in search of a deeper metaphoric value. At the outset of this discussion we witnessed Kaplan's frustration with architecture as an invisible discipline, the water we swim in. My sense of this project is that he has succeeded in bringing design explicitly to the foreground. Standing within a massive chamber of smoothed stone with sunlight beaming in through one of a series of light

²⁸⁶ Stewart Brand. "4 Environmental Heresies." TED Talks. June 2009. Available online at http://www.ted.com/talks/stewart_brand_proclaims_4_environmental_heresies.html. Accessed on November 1, 2010.

chimneys, it would be hard not to remain highly reflexive about the design, the crafted nature of the space we are occupying. The duplicity of the design, using such high-tech (i.e. god-like) capacity to pursue such a low-tech vision perhaps carries a ‘swords to ploughshares’ quality, where the furthest reach of our technological and industrial might yields such a simple interaction with the non-Human world.

Secondly, as we have seen, both the design process and the hypothetical construction process involve deeply responsive engagements with the materials. Rather than being able to place lightbulbs where necessary, or calibrate load-bearing beams, this process requires deep ‘listening’, a fundamental responsiveness towards the natural agents involved. Kaplan described this as negotiating “between ... structural integrity and light, it was the dance between the two.” This deeply collaborative process leading to a design that installs no technological systems into the space whatsoever succeeds in foregrounding the natural agencies fundamentally. Instead of the familiar talk of ‘building performance’ or ‘performance standards’ of our technologies, here the stage belongs exclusively to the ‘natural’ agents of stone and sun. Thus through the human actions of design, technology, and industrial processes, the voice of the nonhuman world can not only participate in, but animate a larger dialogue about where we are in history, this so-called Anthropocene.

Such an interpretation might hearken to mind Don McKay’s efforts to thingify, in his case, to use the technology of language as a means of giving voice to the other. As we saw with McKay, it is undeniably an anthropocentric, culturally-specific gesture, but one that works best with the participation of the object in question. This becomes more literal in Kaplan’s work. For McKay the metaphor would collapse without the participation of the other, for Kaplan the roof would come down.

For this reason, despite the obvious land art comparison and the criticism such association might evoke, I do not hear Ozymandias crying out from inside this space.²⁸⁷ This design does not strike me as a statement of human (or, for that matter, masculine) power, but rather a statement of deep collaboration, a fundamental interdependence of relatively autonomous participants in its success. True enough, the stone cannot unilaterally decide how it wants to be shaped, but nor can the architect. The sunlight does not choose its places to enter the space but the designer must collaborate with a fairly rigid set of parameters it will accommodate.

The suggestion that we are living in the Anthropocene may itself seem audacious. How dare we make such an aggrandizing statement? Is this not more of the same kind of hubris that created this mess? Having heard Steward Brand discuss the issue, and knowing him to be one of the earliest and most dedicated pioneers of

²⁸⁷ “Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” from Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’.

the environmental movement, I felt there was plenty of sweat and suffering behind his remarks. Asking us to get good at our capacity ‘as gods’ was the furthest thing from congratulatory. It was a challenge, a demand. This *is* the relationship we have forged with the planet. Denying so and hiding behind some image of natural sanctity is no longer an option. However much it might imply a deep respect for the power and ingenuity of natural systems, it relies on a larger narrative of separation that is not only untenable but also irresponsible. No matter how much we might wish it were untrue, we are, for better or worse, (but quite possibly for better), *inextricable* from our worlds.²⁸⁸ The urgency of hybridity is upon us. Environmental agendas that urge us to step out of the way to let nature sort it out may be irresponsible at this point, turtling under the challenge we have provoked.

My ultimate read of this architectural proposition is that it insists we acknowledge our capacity, acknowledge our radically changed material relationship with the planet, and follow up with a similar transformation of our conceptual relationship. It asks that we act accordingly, responsibly, responsively, and with an enduring belief in *beauty*. “I know that’s a loaded term,” says Kaplan, “but I can’t get away from it. There are things that transcend periods of history and style. You can’t enter the mosques of Esfahan without being absolutely struck by it. I have no connection to the networks behind that, and yet...it’s beauty.”

While Kaplan’s own analysis of the sustainability crisis focused very much on the capitalist compression of time into critically short-term thinking, I find this concern rolls nicely into the largely interpretive framework I am deriving from the proposal.

Everything you established as a priority in the theoretical framing demands rock cut architecture, it is different in kind than familiar spaces, it embodies longevity, it gives a physical presence to nature as you occupy it, it is such a natural fit.

I remember Kaplan making this remark as we were surrounded by the immersive installation, animated digital images pulling us inside the virtual space. The simplicity of the space along with its material composition of stone offers a durability to the space that speaks of the kind of long-term thinking Kaplan prioritizes so highly.

But as mentioned before, there is nothing a caveman wouldn’t recognize in the space, and so not only does it cast the imagination forward into a contemplation of where we are going, but also backward, into a contemplation of where we have been. The long march of the planet is spoken by the sedimentation patterns

²⁸⁸ Recall the ontological resolution to the McKay’s paradox of hearing the voice of the other, listening with language, where the human frame is an enriching gesture. This theme will return in augmented form with a discussion of regenerative sustainability to conclude the dissertation.

on the walls. The much shorter narrative of humanity's cultural evolution is written in our capacity to give such articulate voice to the stone. Its capacity to 'speak time' in this manner puts the space at an impasse between a prehistoric sense of ourselves, and the 'superspecies' we're struggling to become. My lasting impression of the project cannot help but consider it something grandiose, *The Temple of the Anthropocene*: a material embodiment and experiential metaphor for the existential, imaginative shift that looms.

6.10 Fruitful disagreements

It is almost in the spirit of house-cleaning that I feel it necessary to offer a few concluding remarks that raise certain differences of opinion that remain following the discussion of Kaplan's work. First, it is important to recapitulate Kaplan's analysis of the larger interest in emergence, interactivity, and collaborative creation present in the commission document. As we saw, he appears convinced that humans think and act along set tracks that steer us conceptually. Therefore the idea that collective, interactive engagement can access a kind of improvisatory agency through emergent dynamics strikes him as naïve. The challenge for inspiring collectives towards new possibilities is to reset the tracks on their behalf. In other words, point them in a particular direction, towards a space that invites or even provokes a different conceptual framework or horizon and then let them wander.

How to compare this with what we saw in the case of the Electric Company, where collaborative dynamics are put in place to take individuals where they feel they cannot get on their own? Is it fair to say it is a clear example of Kaplan's analysis requiring exceptions? Doubtless. Yet the specificity of the individuals involved in the Electric Company process—a specificity that emerged as even more crucial when *You Are Very Star* took on different creative agents—speaks more to an important middle ground. The Electric Company is already improvisatory. It goes without saying that creativity lies at the core of a contemporary theatre company. Assuming the same can be said for any collective does seem a little idealistic.

But is this a question of capacity or invitation? Is it instinct or idiom? In other words if we continue to create the space for public improvisation, collective processes dedicated to exploring and shifting meaning making through emergent, interactive process, would it grow less idealistic? For now it serves to flag the issue, as trying to come to terms with these questions of agency, idiom, improvisation, emergence, and collective meaning making lies at the heart of the research and will be a focus of concluding discussions (what I propose as the 'innovation-regurgitation spectrum' further along).

A second claim worth taking issue with in Kaplan's analysis is his identification of large international political conferences as the most potent leverage points for environmental change. This assumption strikes me as a

species of his larger belief in linear, top-down processes, rather than those with a belief in a collective, bottom-up agency. Kaplan assumes too easily that where the appointed leaders go, so goes the capacity to really do something different. The history of sustainability appears to refute this. Big international climate talks have demonstrated over and over that however many positions of power might have gathered in the room, consistently there seems to be very little agency, very little mobility, indeed, perhaps very little power, in such contexts. At the same time, in less obvious concentrations of power, i.e. national, regional, municipal, or community levels, change seems more possible. True, the degree of change may not be an overwhelming international sweep of transformation, but right now it is where most of the work is getting done.

Finally, there is a crucial sense in which Kaplan side-stepped many of the interests of the commission document in favour of his own analysis of sustainability. As we saw he largely forewent any engagement with Heidegger's sense of being, and Latour's analysis of sustainability as a condition of the Modern Constitution in favour of his own interest in Habermas' neo-Marxist analysis of a lifeworld colonized by capitalism. Curiously enough, I was more than able to analyze this proposal in terms of my own interests. It seems we struck something of a tacit agreement here ('you ignore my theoretical premises and I'll ignore yours').

This is an outcome I am excited by as it marks what I take to be a success in the commissioning strategy I tried to establish. I did not want to push the analytical framework too far into the creative processes of each artist's preoccupation. I purposefully was very light-handed about how much to insist on what they should engage with, and instead set the initiating ideas as just that, initiating, rather than guiding. My hope was that this would allow the art to follow its own nose, for I do not know what the burning issues for each creative discipline or individual might be, nor can I see what capacity is ripe in any practice now, or what conversations are at their prime.

Spending this chapter coming to terms with what I feel is a very insightful and successful response to the commission, one that took a very roundabout way of engaging with its ideas, is satisfying because such an approach yielded abundant insight for me to chase through the field of architecture. I would even go so far as to suggest that there is much more in this approach, with me having to reach beyond my own preoccupations to 'find architecture' wherever it happened to go, rather than architecture working too hard to find me, and leaving some of its most enchanting possibilities aside in the name of compliance. I feel there was ultimately more for me to look at with this approach than had Kaplan done his best to reconcile his instincts too strongly to my own interests. It strikes me as a successful example of establishing an invitational range, a particular quality of conversation, perhaps inspiring a certain way of thinking about the issue, rather than establishing to firm a set of commissioning instructions and then clearly communicating this range as a leaping-off point.

Chapter 7: Art, Agency and the Non-Aesthetic

The concluding discussions for this research are divided into two chapters. The present chapter deals primarily with the challenges associated with artistic agency and the non-aesthetic, that is, the challenge of being prescriptive with artistic languages at a fairly general level. The following chapter is devoted to the specific concerns of the present research, what exactly I was hoping to be prescriptive about: using art to find our way out of Modernity.

Near the outset of this dissertation's discussion of artistic agency and its relationship to ostensibly non-aesthetic issues such as sustainability, I offered a conjecture. That the familiar and apparently growing appeal to the arts from those hoping to foster change in their worlds rests on a large, though admittedly unverified, network of empirical evidence. We turn to the arts to shape our societies based on a tacit recognition of how the arts have shaped our selves. This transformative agency is written deep into our self-understandings, it is something we know unthinkingly, art *has* agency.

At the end of this study this remains conjecture. What I continue to find compelling about it is that it explains the untutored descriptive certainty concerning artistic agency. It does not require theoretical conceptualization or practical capacity, its proponents need neither be philosophically nor artistically inclined. Which may also explain why such certainty regarding artistic agency seems so often to undermine itself in hasty application. That is, I feel that we consistently underestimate the delicate work involved in transitioning from a descriptive certainty concerning artistic agency to some prescriptive likelihood. Within such efforts I find there to be a crucial absence of theoretical underpinnings that might help to structure the relationship between art and its non-aesthetic concerns, or, more broadly conceived, the relationship between art and its societies.

This research has been one attempt to make some progress in this direction: To try and clarify what we are talking about when we talk about artistic agency (in general, and as it pertains to sustainability), to understand more precisely what such agency is made of, and to gain some insight into the necessary conditions by which it might be engaged. This chapter will explore these questions using empirical illustration from the works developed by the four commissioned artists.

Before getting underway, I would like to bookend the research by once again flagging the positional biases I bring to this work. While I made similar remarks to this effect starting out, this research process has deepened my grasp of the issue since. In short, I feel it now more than ever. I am a middle-class, white, North American male who has spent his entire life dedicated to European canons of art, music, and

intellectual thought. The more I gain some reflexivity regarding these features of myself, the more I realize their underlining recursivity: it isn't just the world I know, it is the world I am.

This research is an attempt to bring questions of sustainability to bear on this cultural realm, and, crucially, vice versa, an effort to take Eurocentric art practices with their long historical pedigree and entrenched idioms, and confront contemporary questions of how to engender more sustainable societies. At the end of this study I feel I have learned a tremendous amount about art as it exists within my own cultural context, and about sustainability as it exists within particular academic discourses. However, moving through the theoretical, practical, and analytical stages of this research, I have begun to feel the boundaries of its intellectual range pinching ever more acutely.

To be fair, this study stretched my intellectual and analytical range in a number of directions already, requiring critical capacity in artistic disciplines I was not overly familiar with. Expanding that view into more broadly diversified perspectives is an obvious virtue, but not one I could have managed on my own within the scope of a doctoral study. I confess I am always mildly suspicious when I read Western research on non-Western identity, society, aesthetics, etc. as I am never sure of what is being lost in translation. This is a problem for any hope of expanding beyond the cultural limitations of the research pursued here as I feel I could not have done much cross-cultural work with anything close to the same capacity as I was able to bring to Western disciplines. I could not have asked the kinds of questions I was interested in here, nor carried out the practical engagement with such questions with much efficacy. Yet at the same time, it has been the present examination of such questions within a singular (though by no means monolithic) context that has made me more curious about how they exist outside this context. Banging up against worldview, finding it in the traditions and outlooks of the artists involved in the research, finding it in the analytical instincts I bring to the work, in the decisions that framed the problem, all this has made the possibility of an effective comparative analysis across cultures, across worldviews, that much more compelling, but equally so, that much more intimidating as well. A better response to this issue awaits further research.

7.1 The strife of prescription

I would like to begin with a discussion of the prescriptive difficulties I found in fostering robust relationships between artistic agency and what I am referring to as 'non-aesthetic concerns' (e.g. sustainability, health promotions, etc.). While this study has focused exclusively on sustainability, I think much of what I have learned, if it is useful to sustainability, is useful to other, similar concerns. That is, concerns that are framed by a given discourse within the public imagination, those that exist within fields of meaning, and are

substantively caught up with their cultural narration. It may not help an engineer make a better cellphone, but I can imagine turning to social justice issues, or health promotion with the insights gained here.

Recall that in this research I developed a commission project based on a series of prescriptive premises I felt might improve relations between art and its non-aesthetic concerns. Fundamentally it was an attempt to approach art as an independent practice in its own right, needing no larger instrumental function to justify its existence. I made an effort to imbed due respect for the traditions, the idioms, discipline, training, and dedication that goes into such practices and not assume the power of these languages can be plucked from their idioms willy-nilly. The commission attempted to use the prescriptive premises as a means to walk a fine line between these convictions and the potentially hypocritical desire to point artistic attention in a particular direction all the same.

They include: Art as double agent; art as epistemology; and art as ‘meta-agent’, ideal for engaging larger dimensions of worldview (all to be discussed momentarily). With these commitments in mind, the commission engaged sustainability through the lens of ‘environmental ontology’, the notion that sustainability is fundamentally an issue of worldview, metaphysics, ontology, etc., that is to say, a challenge to renovate the conceptual frameworks through which we build and view our realities and ourselves. Forefront in this prescribed overhaul is the central fixation of the Environmental Ontologists’ argument, what I have referred to as epistemic Modernism, the instinctive structuring of our worlds along lines of subject-object dualisms, fact-value distinctions, and the stark division of nature from culture. This became the content of the commissioning project. To what degree might artistic engagement be of some help in finding our way out of a world such as this? And how might we go about engaging it in such a project?

7.2 Distinguishing agencies: behavioural vs. ontological

Having worked academically with questions of artistic agency for some time now, and lived with them professionally for even longer, I feel that there is an early fork in the road that we often fail to notice when either discussing or pursuing artistic agency. This fork, I suggest, requires that we distinguish between two kinds of agencies, ontological and behavioural. This distinction I offer as a clarifying rather than absolute categorization. The aim is not to permanently segregate one from the other, but to sensitize ourselves to their differences in the hopes of improving prescriptive approaches—to know more explicitly what our journey hopes to find, and what we need to bring with us in order to find it. Under the category ‘behavioural agency’ I would put practices such as ‘arts and social change’ activities and the arts-based research movements discussed in chapter 2. Such practices and approaches are structured in such a way as to prioritize questions of research results and social agendas over aesthetic outcomes.

What I have spent a good deal of effort trying to distinguish from this approach, within research and academic contexts, is what I consider ontological agency. Under this category I would file the broad and disparate practices of creating art with expressive, aesthetic, and imaginative priorities in mind, as, I hope to show, it is precisely such priorities that inspired this larger assessment of artistic agency. When Heidegger talks about art as “a push that enters history”, when Marcuse claims art can offer us a “new rationality”, when Simone Weill discusses art’s “radical decentering”, and Dieleman identifies the capacity of art to extend “ontological reflexivity”, it is ontological agency that is being described, that capacity to shift conceptual framings of self and world in transformative ways.

At the risk of embarrassing myself within scholastic precincts, I offer my own phenomenology of this capacity where it seems useful. For example, certain pieces of music are, for me, consistently transformative. On any given morning, I might step out into the world brimming with ambition, ready to conquer adversaries and out-hustle competitors, but if you play for me Rachmaninov Vesper opus 37, no. 2, any truculent sense of self or competitive sense of reality vanishes. Instead of calling for some degree of aggression, the world of strangers with which I am surrounded, calls for care. Any sense of being ‘owed’ by this world is instantaneously replaced with a sense of being blessed by it. Is this just mood? A fleeting emotional effect? Is it opportunistic to call this transformative?

I do not think so, for a few reasons. To call something ‘consistently transformative’ is obviously evidence that such effects are impermanent and malleable. However, I suggest this is, in fact, an ideal calibration for artistic agency, a challenge to inhabit a space of ontological possibility rather than seeking irrevocable alterity. Arguably art has earned our collective indulgence precisely because of its malleability, its impermanence, its temporary ‘make-believe’. But this does not mean that such ontological agency is a spell that inevitably wears off without a trace.

Cumulative effects at the level of the individual are likely the result of repeated exposure, a deeper embedding of a transformation. Bruno Latour gives a nice characterization of this in his recent work *Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (2013), where the “beings of fiction” (i.e. art) are of primary concern.

Someone who says “I love Bach” becomes in part a *subject* capable of loving that music he receives from Bach, we might say that he “downloads” from Bach, the wherewithal to appreciate him. Emitted by the work, such downloads allow the recipient to be moved while gradually becoming a “friend of interpretable objects”. If listeners are gripped by a piece, it is not at all because they are projecting their

own pathetic subjectivity on it; it is because the work demands that they, insignificant amateurs, brilliant interpreters, or passionate critics, become part of its journey.²⁸⁹

This theme will be taken up more explicitly further along. For now, it is enough to evoke the quality of agency such repeated exposure might have. Our subjectivities—that is to say, our *selves*—become artifact to the expressive agency of an artistic work much as a valley is artifact of a river.

At a more collective level, cumulative effects might occur as diffuse exposure embeds a similar perspective across multiple actors. This offers the ontological agency of art an added mechanism of dispersal, a social vector in addition to an aesthetic one. This, I suggest is how Simone Weill’s “radical decentering” (individual) becomes Martin Heidegger’s “push that enters history” (collective). The former is personal and likely fleeting, but should it gain cumulative effects across multiple actors, it can shift towards the latter, from the personal to the historical.

My desire to separate this kind of agency, the ontological kind, from the behavioral, is not to try and privilege one over the other (however much the former is an obvious priority for me personally), but to try and structure a discussion of artistic agency with greater specificity. Recall that in the theoretical framework of this research, Environmental philosopher Andrew Light proposed the category ‘Environmental Ontologists’ to identify scholars for whom challenges of sustainability were not simply the result of technological, political, or ecological obstacles or concerns. I found this category very helpful to think with as it gathered and clarified a dimension of sustainability I was struggling to identify under a useful banner. At the same time, it helped coordinate a variety of thinking into a coherent body of literature, however broad and diffuse.

In the name of clarifying and structuring research into artistic agency, I would like to copy Light’s ‘Environmental Ontologists’ with a parallel category. ‘Artistic Ontologists’, I suggest, identifies those for whom artistic agency is fundamentally ontological. It helps make reference to a specific kind of agency, while at the same time, references a diffuse literature exploring that idea. Martin Heidegger, Herbert Marcuse, George Steiner, Gregory Bateson, Iris Murdoch, Simone Weil, Richard Rorty, Elaine Scarry, Martha Nussbaum, Nicolas Bourriaud, Hans Dieleman, and Sacha Kagan, are just a handful of scholars whose work identifies and prioritizes the ontological agency of artistic engagement. Their interest in art does not begin and end with political action, behavioural change, social activism, community development, or therapeutic effects, but rather views these possibilities as a consequence of art’s metaphysical implications, ontological agency, and epistemological status.

²⁸⁹ Bruno Latour. *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*. Harvard University Press, 2013. 241.

7.2.1 Ontological agency and the aesthetic priority

It is my working conviction that a necessary component of this view identifies such ontological agency with an aesthetic priority. That is to say, art may offer Marcuse's 'new rationality' only if it has not freed itself of aesthetic desire. It is the aesthetic that guides creative inquiry towards meaningful form beyond the reference of existing conceptual frameworks. Art that has excused itself of such a priority will undoubtedly serve the social or the behavioural in valuable ways, but I fear will fall short of the metaphysical on a consistent basis. Art is not an exercise in world-making without the burden of beauty.

Take, for example, Don McKay's engagement with metaphor. For McKay, we, our worlds, and the things in them, all possess 'wilderness'—elements, possibilities, or alternative 'realities' unrealized by a given conceptual framework. Wilderness is what does not appear on a particular map of a given thing, akin to Heidegger's *earth/world* account (see chapter 1). Wilderness is the potential for ontological difference, and therefore ontological agency. It is the potential for our account of a thing's 'mode of being' to be revised in our conceptual awareness. Not surprisingly, then, the intrusion of wilderness, the encounter with some aspect of a thing not captured by its present conception, is enough to produce a sense of vertigo, a dizziness as the balance of one's reality tips with the emergence of new ontological proportion.

For McKay, poetry can access such wilderness via metaphor, that "use of language to demonstrate its own inadequacy." It says something that breaks the rules of language, something that is ostensibly incoherent, yet nevertheless resonant with a deeper field of meaning within human experience. In other words it makes faulty reference within a frame of meaning to find meaning beyond that frame.

In achieving this, there is a crucial sense of 'getting it right', not an absolute sense, but one that exists within the intersubjective field shared by poet, entity, and reader, where the agency of each is represented in the 'rightness' of the metaphor. To me, this has important implications for art and reality, as I will endeavour to explain. For now, I would like to suggest that the category of this rightness, where its success is to be both pursued and measured, is within the aesthetic. That is what the aesthetic is—the challenge and means of capturing expressive, intersubjective qualities of our world. It is the right image, the right word (in the Heideggerian sense), the right rhythm, the right positioning of experiencing perspective, the right positioning of reader, the right structure framing the image, etc. It is an aesthetic desire that pursues resonance with referent meaning beyond the grid of language, experience beyond immediate conception. It is, therefore, the aesthetic upon which ontological agency rests.

7.2.2 What the distinction implies

If this distinction between behavioural and ontological agency is worthwhile, then a pair of related consequences for prescriptive engagements with the arts should be identified. First, we should not expect the typical outcomes of one approach to emerge from the other. In other words, ontological approaches should not be expected to offer much in the way of immediate behavioural outcomes. Similarly, behavioural approaches should be accepted for having their primary impacts at the levels of social, political, and therapeutic outcomes.

Related to this then, is the obvious caution that we should be careful not to use arguments from one to justify approaches from the other. In other words, if the theoretical justification for artistic engagement hinges on ontological arguments then this entails particular modes of practice (in this case a process oriented towards aesthetic priorities). Similarly, if one is using behavioral arguments to justify artistic engagement one should ensure the practical approach to artistic activity is consistent with those larger arguments (i.e. processes that tend towards inclusivity, access, non-judgmental conceptions of value, etc.). One should not promote a particular brand of agency unless one is prepared to establish the conditions by which its pursuit is a reasonable expectation.

Very little I did in the practical applications of this research held much hope of translating into direct political action, just as very little that I see in certain applications of artistic engagement holds much hope of producing compelling aesthetic outcomes. Connecting an understanding of what we are doing, what we expect its outcomes to be, and how we are going to go about it, seems a basic feature of structuring any approach to research. Yet it was one that I struggled to apply to artistic engagement in a very clear manner. Doubtless this was in part a feature of my own inexperience. Yet I also feel that clarity on the matter is relatively thin in typical prescriptive engagements with artistic agency in general. It seems we promote the value of the arts in our societies by rhyming off the laundry list of anything good that can possibly come of an artistic moment. Fair enough if one is fending off bureaucratic interrogation. However, being much more precise about this line of thinking within research contexts is important if we are to avoid the disillusionment that was identified at the beginning of this study.²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ There is, of course, a second concern begged by this distinction. Where does behavioural agency come from? I think there are many examples of it coming from all the social vectors at play in a creative experience, being imaginative, being together, pretending to be someone else, finding new languages, new ways of expression, etc. All of this can happen within artistic practices that are not geared towards an aesthetic priority and surely have profound impacts. But is there a clarifying distinction to make here? That we have not quite entered the realm of *artistic agency* at this point? The research I have done here is enough to ponder this issue but certainly not resolve it.

7.3 Art as double agent

The example of metaphorical action in McKay illustrates a second theme that has emerged in this investigation into artistic agency, that of art as a double agent. For me this captures the distinct ways in which the agency of a work is inextricably bound up with its capacity to be both ‘for’ and ‘against’ its encompassing context. The abundant literature identifying art as a source of reflexivity, as something that breaks apart an existing rationality, clearly identifies the subversive potential of art. Yet at the same time, it strikes me as difficult to find a context where art is not equally participant in the assumptions of that context, supportive of its rationality, and compliant with its particular ways of being. Art, it seems to me, is a place where this duplicity co-exists peacefully, productively, perhaps even of necessity.

Its presence in the works commissioned for this research suggest a mildly prescriptive sense of this characterization might be useful with regard to aspirations of ontological agency. In other words, it may be a quality that artistic practices should aspire towards (and, I suggest, most do as a matter of course). The recent example of metaphor provides a clear sense of language needing to be both for and against its encompassing rationality, its encompassing frame of reference, in order to open that ontological reflexivity. Metaphor’s requirement of truth and falsity, what McKay refers to as using language (compliant) to demonstrate its own inadequacy (subversive), is one example of double agency at work in the pursuit of ontological agency.

In the Electric Company example there are many different strands in both the development process and ‘final’ product that exemplify this sense of art as a double agent, both deferring to the idioms and heuristics of the genre, while at the same time improvising on them or outright refuting them. The prevailing example of such duplicity lay in the structural conceit of ‘audience as watcher’ (a deeply embedded norm) being turned on its ear at crucial moments to become ‘audience as watched’ as we became moving characters in the experience of a separate audience.

The goal here, and what we *may* have felt inklings of, was the subversive action of this gesture working on our larger relationship with the world. That is, undermining subject-object relations by turning the object of our attention (the play) into a reciprocal witnessing subject (as ‘it’ began watching ‘us’), thereby converting our own subjectivity into the position of object. As discussed in the analysis of this work, the stage of development of this piece hampered the full impact of this structural conceit. People were intrigued but unsatisfied. Its impact was at the level of conscious engagement with the concept—i.e. ‘curiosity’—rather than embodied engagement and surely it is the latter where artistic agency resides. This reveals the connection between double agency, ontological agency, and the aesthetic priority, where the ontological reflexivity hinges

on this faithful/subversive dynamic—bringing us convincingly into a world and turning it on its ear—and where ‘convincingly’ equates to some kind of aesthetic accomplishment.

7.3.1 Convincing improvisation

A more simple way to make this point is to cite an almost banal truism of art, ‘you’ve got to know the tune if you want to improvise on it.’ Ultimately the Electric Company production was an unconvincing tune, we did not fall into the world we were experiencing and therefore its improvisations had minimal impact. If the path does not lead convincingly then we do not believe we are there. Thus, anything that takes place there is inconsequential. Without the faithful gesture finding some resonance with a larger field of meaning, we do not trust its departures, nor do we care about its stakes.

This was particularly apparent in the most experimental of the commissions, Giorgio Magnanensi’s *Teatro Dell Udito*. With Giorgio having entered his self-described ‘post-aesthetic’ phase it should not be surprising that there was almost no faithful reference to context in the ‘music’ he presented. Only the presence of instruments, music stands, and other paraphernalia of a concert bespoke its encompassing genre. For many in attendance, the lack of any faithful gestures (melody, rhythm, harmony) left them entirely alienated. Consequently, the improvisatory work of this novel approach to music making had minimal impact. We did not revel in the integration of audience interactivity, as there was almost no sense of how we were affecting such an undetectable process. Similarly the free-form improvisations of the musicians were entirely uncommunicative as they lacked any structural coherence on which to improvise. There was no audience feedback whatsoever regarding the video-audio interactions projected on a large screen, suggesting they were completely ignored as the relationships between them were undetectable. We might have enjoyed the unique acoustics of the space itself, except when I turned to observe whether that was the case, what I saw were people with their fingers in their ears. An utter lack of coherence meant an ultimate lack of subversive agency.

7.3.2 Well-built ambivalence

Perhaps the work that resonates most deeply with this idea of art as a double agent is Kaplan’s architectural proposition. Again, this was a series of digital models rather than an actual building, so imagining the space is as far as we can go in exploring questions of agency. It remains conjecture. Yet here, even at the level of 3D models, the ambivalence of the space is palpable. As a space that seems to lie somewhere between a high-tech design and a cave, the space maintains an ambivalence across the culture/nature boundary. It becomes tricky to tell which agency is more present in the facility, and, in a Heideggerian sense, that makes our own selves ambivalent there. Is this a cultural achievement or a natural wonder? Are we in awe of design or emergence?

Within its existence as a cultural statement, Kaplan's work also maintains a tension between its being as a building and its being as an artwork. It seems as much a massive sculpture as a space to occupy. Again, its ambivalence becomes our ambivalence. Are we appreciators of an aesthetic object or inhabitants of a space? Lastly, the design holds similar ambivalence across temporal boundaries, is this neo-lithic or space-age? Are we feeling the deep sense of history or the vertigo of the future? In each case, the ontological reflexivity is born of the ambivalence of the proposal, its capacity to both refer and refute larger categories of interpretation through which we understand and (hypothetically) inhabit it. Effectively evoking interpretive categories and then proving them insufficient (to both it and ourselves) brings a reflexivity to bear on the experience.

With these examples in mind, I offer this idea of art as a double agent as useful to understanding a crucial dimension of its ontological agency. What seems evident to me now looking at this issue in Kaplan's work, is how 'ambivalence' is a likely synonym for what I am trying to describe, perhaps even a more direct and idiomatic way of making the point. And I would rather make the point in common language if possible. I wonder, however, if the idea of the double agent does useful work in evoking a more acute sense of duplicity, a simultaneous for/against quality, whereas ambivalence is often confused with ambiguity, which, particularly in contemporary art practice, is another thing altogether. Further, ambivalence implies indecision between polarizing possibilities, whereas double agency insists both are operative simultaneously. At the same time, the sense of a 'double agent' goes some distance in connecting this duplicity to larger cultural discourses, conceptual frameworks, and ontological categories, the very things towards which such agency is sought.

7.4 Art as epistemology

Perhaps the operating premise that I felt most convinced of in structuring this inquiry was the idea of art as epistemology. In working as an artist, and having had the good fortune to collaborate with many different artists across different genres (dance, music, poetry, theatre, visual art, photography, and digital media) I have always felt that the most productive posture for a creative endeavour is that of *inquiry*, creativity as inquiry, art as a means of finding things out, a way of knowing. And this should seem fairly obvious. Artistic practices are clearly in a more creative position when able to ask questions and be curious about a given matter than when they are tasked with asserting or disseminating particular positions. This is not because this allows art to simply 'say whatever it wants', but because the process of inquiry via artistic languages *is* where the agency of art takes place. It is the inquiring, responsive engagement that triggers the feedback of form, of pattern, style, image, expression, etc. The agency of art is unlocked when we work through a given matter of concern *in* the aesthetic.

I have never worked with an artist that needs to be told this at the front end of a creative project. My discussion of the matter was an attempt to preserve artistic practices from the didacticism common to instrumental uses of art—the hopes of teaching the public either what they should know or what they should feel. As George Steiner says, quoting Keats, “it is the very force of declared intent...“the palpable design upon us” in bad art, in kitsch, which we must learn to ignore.”²⁹¹ As I tried to illustrate in the theoretical framework for this research, didactic burdens undermine essential qualities of artistic practice and idioms of consumption. Beyond relieving artists of such burdens, however, what does this prescriptive premise look like in practice?

7.4.1 Audible resonance

Again, McKay’s example of metaphor is a good place to begin, as here we see the essence of metaphor as *resonance*. If a metaphor is successful it is because it uses linguistic incoherence to find coherence beyond language, in some broader field of meaning and experience. In order to find that ‘supra-linguistic field’, metaphorical gestures must acquire McKay’s paradoxical capacity to “listen with language”. A metaphor for the paradox of metaphor might illustrate the point: If you depress the sustain pedal on a piano in order to lift the dampers off the strings so they are free to resonate and then you sing into the piano, sympathetic vibrations will cause the strings tuned to the pitch you sang to sing back to you. Nothing has struck the strings except sound waves and yet this is enough. This is how I imagine McKay’s paradox in practical terms, singing well-tuned images into the world and waiting to hear if the world hums back.

This raises a deeper question that is worth touching on here, although it will be taken up in greater detail further on. Is the agency of art somewhat epiphenomenal? In other words, when a metaphor ‘resonates’, what is resonating? The art? Or that with which the art is concerned? Is artistic agency the agency of art? Or the capacity of art to carry the agency of its content into the world of human experience in ways that other forms of representation diminish? This is a subtle distinction—whether the agency is that of the painting of the bird or the bird in the painting. That the agency remains dependent on its artistic manifestation seems fair enough, and the distinction may have little relevance to an audience’s experience. However, in trying to understand the nature of artistic negotiations with content, the ‘attempt to capture’ may be (or need to be) an ‘attempt to free’ within fields of meaning. ‘How can I fit you in my world?’ the artist asks. ‘Under what conditions will you enter form?’

²⁹¹ George Steiner. *Real Presences*. Faber and Faber. London. 1989. 174.

I feel the need to dissuade my own Modernist instincts here, the leap to essentialism tempted by the resonance of a humming world. As we have seen, metaphor is an experience-dependent resonance between artist, audience, and object, and therefore always in flight: Subject-, context-, and process-dependent. Metaphorical knowing is inseparable from experience, the who, where, and how of the encounter that animates any ‘what’ that might emerge. It is the opposite of the epistemic vivisection we’ve somehow come to trust, slicing something out of experience in order to determine what it really is. Metaphorical knowing must exist in the space of performance, both our performance to it, and its performance to us.

While McKay’s paradox may be a nobler option for knowing the world, one that respects the integrity of the other and does not try and wrench our own perspective out of its subjectivity, it remains paradox nonetheless. The ultimate silence of his walking stick at rest in the middle of one of their hikes together speaks volumes. In cases where we engage the non-human in the hopes of cultivating its agency within processes of representation it is imperative not to lose sight of this deep ambivalence: first, the agency of something beyond the reach of language which the aesthetic is hoping to capture (there *is* something there), and second, its ultimate absence, finding the voice of the other only in our own language and not losing sight of the sound of our own voice. Managing this ambivalence is, by many accounts, the ‘art’ of the aesthetic gesture, something that speaks directly to our larger agenda of trying to find our way out of Modernism via the languages of art. This leaves an essential question hanging, namely what sort of thing is it that is ‘there’? This question will be addressed in the following chapter.

Art as epistemology, or in more practical terms, creativity as inquiry, finds rich illustration in Derek Kaplan’s work as well. When asked to explore the relationship between architecture and sustainability, Kaplan resisted the inertia of the field’s present and popular response to sustainability, the green building movement, in favour of stepping back and asking the question afresh. How does architecture connect to sustainability? Kaplan’s discussion of green architecture identified the near-exclusive industry response to this question: *efficiency*. To avoid this, Kaplan stepped further back from the issue and asked a more fundamental question: What does sustainability consist of? This led him to a very different, even contrary conclusion. Instead of efficiency gains, he proposed a deep, embodied interruption of capitalism’s structural logic, an interruption participants could feel, a sensation that would inhabit them as they inhabited the space. This immediately pointed the design process towards entirely different questions about how the aesthetic dimensions of architecture can engage our metaphysical instincts, and what those instincts are (relevant to an analysis of sustainability).²⁹²

²⁹² It is worth pointing out that, at this stage, the process of inquiry was not aesthetic, but analytical. Arguably it is this preliminary analytical work that was crucial to providing subsequent aesthetic inquiry with the kind of openness that would enable more genuine engagement. See chapter 6 for further discussion.

Within the design phase, inquiry captures the spirit of Kaplan's efforts to find an aesthetic response to the question he framed for himself, that embodied interruption of capitalism as a lifeworld. The goal is to arrive at a space that is not a further metaphor for technological mastery, that does not speak of simply 'engineering our way out' of the environmental crisis, but rather interrupts the larger cultural logic of unsustainability. The paradox here, obviously, is that it is precisely such capacity that makes the design proposition feasible. It is the interaction of recent developments in industrial and digital tools that offer the design its plausibility. Forefront here was the interactive, emergent process that arose between himself as designer, and the materials he was working with, stone and light. As I tried to illustrate in the previous discussion of this work, there is an agency that the materials acquire in the process thanks to advances in parametric design software. They become articulate as animated by digital tools, able to enter into conversation with Kaplan's design propositions in ways that consistently surprised him and sent him back to develop further propositions (see figure 6.1).

Both McKay and Kaplan share a similar approach to this idea of art as epistemology. In both cases, they have actively cultivated the tools and practices that allow them to distribute agency within their artistic practices. Nevertheless, they are the only human agents in their processes, interrogating their content within the aesthetic. While both sought to empower the agency of their materials (stick, boots, chair, stone, light) through a responsive engagement via their various mapping technologies (i.e. figurative language and modeling software) in the end both artists exist as sole arbiter of value. It is their inquiry.

7.4.2 Wider echoes

Both Kevin Kerr and Giorgio Magnanensi take the issue of distributed agency much further, pushing it to various extremes in the context of this research. Beyond adopting a posture of inquiry towards what we might consider as 'semi-articulate' agencies (i.e. materials, things, users, audiences, etc.), they seek to incorporate a multiplicity of co-creators into the process itself. Eventually, this greatly expanded distribution of agency is extended to include the audience itself as one of these active agencies.

In the discussion of the Electric Company I tried to structure my analysis of distributed agency by differentiating procedural emergence from substantive emergence. Procedural emergence featured the use of collaborative creative inquiry into the nature of the work. It is how the work is developed. Substantive emergence however, features the goal of creating work that remains explicitly open-ended, interactive, and therefore ultimately emergent in its moment of consumption by an audience. It is what the work is. The commissioned works from the Electric Company and Giorgio Magnanensi feature both aspects. This informs

this investigation into the epistemic premise as it explores forms that distribute the agency to inquire beyond the normal boundaries of a creative process and what outcomes this might have. In both cases, the shift towards the substantive emergent is the inclusion of the audience as part of that creative inquiry, they become, to varying degrees, active creative agents in the development of the works they experience.

The Electric Company was built around emergent, collaborative creation methods that are typically referred to as “Devised Theatre”. As discussed in chapter 4, devising processes are efforts to develop work in emergent ways that are responsive to their immanent contexts. What elements are present? The agency of site or venue, thematic content, history, commissioning agency, and creative collaborators are all included in what is fundamentally an open, emergent inquiry: what story do we find here? As the Electric Company evolved their approaches to devising, it became marked by what Kerr referred to as ‘right brain/left brain’ dynamics, where the emergent, collaborative, associative, dreaming, right brain activity necessitated structural, analytical, clarifying, decision-making, left-brain activity. And as Electric Company director Kim Collier pointed out, the wider the distribution of agency, the more structured a process is required.

With the development of *You Are Very Star*, Kerr pushed this dynamic further by extending the process of creative inquiry to incorporate simultaneously an unprecedented number of creative capacities. Narrative, staging, design, and rehearsal were all developed at the same time. The narrative lines were multiple, as were the writers responsible for developing them. Ultimately the piece was developed by over a dozen creative agents all working interactively, in a relatively un-hierarchical process, i.e. design could not dictate narrative, narrative could not dictate staging, etc. Relative to the present concern, all aspects were active agents of inquiry. Everyone had to adopt a fundamentally responsive posture to try and find their way through the development process. Crucially, however, this process sought ways to include the audience as well, providing an enormous challenge to the left-brain, structural, analytical work the Electric Company had found so important to creating successful work.

As discussed previously, the balance was never struck. Efforts to structure the process, to feedback on it so as to highlight and amplify what was starting to resonate and develop a larger pattern of meaning, were frustrated by the presence of too many moving parts. Ultimately prior lessons learned by the Electric Company were unable to be applied in this context making the wider distribution of inquiry ultimately a source of frustration to artists who remain committed to the value of an aesthetic outcome. In other words, a sense of frustration was the result of remaining committed to an expectation that art be coherent, communicative, evocative, powerful, etc.

7.4.3 ‘Signal to noise ratios’

Given that Giorgio Maganensi has explicitly entered his post-aesthetic phase, art, for him, finds its value in behavioural dimensions of engagement instead. Not surprisingly then, Giorgio took this idea of substantive emergence the furthest of the four commissions. Here the work itself was a live compositional procedure designed to inquire into its own immanent ingredients. Incidentally, if I were to go back and read the theoretical framework, methodological aspirations, and commission materials associated with this research and then imagine possible artistic responses to those materials, there would be no description which I would find more exciting than this: A live compositional procedure inquiring into its own immanent ingredients!

Why did I find this so unsatisfactory? In one sense the answer is easy: because it didn’t sound anything like any music that I know how to listen to. But to let this go as a question of taste misses the important insight this experiment brings to the initiating premises of the research. *Why* didn’t it sound like music? An internationally-esteemed composer and head of Vancouver New Music was in charge of the event. There were a dozen musicians there with their instruments all making sounds. The entire audience was raised on a shared sense of some very basic features of music. So if this was an immanent, emergent process, why did the result sound nothing like music?

Recall that Giorgio took fragments of compositional languages—pitches mostly, from borrowed compositions—and modified those languages to be as unspecific as possible. His collaborators were asked not to be too literal in representing these pre-existing ideas (i.e. not play the right pitches) such that the soundscape was highly randomized. He then set up a process where musicians and audience were free to participate in a collective inquiry, musicians and their instruments, audience and their boxes. Audience gestures inspired musical response, which, presumably, inspired further audience gesture.

In this way, the work was able to emerge within an immanent context free from the control of a transcending authority (i.e. a composer). Instead, the interactivity of the system’s constituent parts produce the work for themselves, thus manifesting Giorgio’s ideal of making creative processes more democratic. The problem was, the constituent parts were unable to make specific propositions to the system of which they were a part, and, crucially, they were unable to feedback on any of the system’s responses. Nothing could be taken up or rejected. No trend could be amplified or diminished. Thus no order could emerge. No gesture was communicative in either a pre-existing frame of meaning (i.e. music) but neither could any new communicative coherence develop. The system maintained maximum entropy throughout until a transcending authority (composer) ended the piece arbitrarily.

If there was a virtue in democratizing who got to ask questions within this creative inquiry (audience interactivity); and there was a virtue in democratizing the sonic palette within which such questions might get asked (a lack of hierarchical structures such as key relations, rhythmic immediacies, melodic influence that might overdetermine or confine the musical instinct immanent in the audience), both of these virtues were rendered inert by the fact that there was no mechanism to feedback on the process as a means of selecting, capturing, preserving, and building on any prior event. In other words, there was no way to create meaning in the system. What I think is worth noting about this, is that because of this not only did the process nullify the creative agency of the composer (as Giorgio explicitly intended), it also nullified the creative agency of the audience as well, (as I believe Giorgio did not intend). In fact, based on extensive interviews with Giorgio, an increased sense of creative agency via a behavioral engagement with an audience through these compositional processes was the point of this post-aesthetic mode of creativity. However, because our behaviours didn't *do* anything, rather than a metaphor for creativity or agency, it was, in my own experience and that of others in attendance, a metaphor for *uncreativity*. A metaphor for a dearth of agency.

7.4.4 The epistemological premise in practice

This is not what I was hoping the sense of art as epistemology or an approach to creativity as a process of inquiry would provoke. What does this say about the premise, if the commission that ostensibly took this idea on board in the deepest way, ended up, however ironically, abandoning its audience? How should we understand the epistemic premise in light of the spectrum of these works?

Again, first and foremost, I suggest the idea of 'art as epistemology' describes standard practice within the arts (the Westernized, so-called 'high' or 'fine' arts, at any rate), and so this premise serves primarily to mesh non-aesthetic interests with a basic operating principle of the aesthetic. That is, it is an understanding which non-aesthetic interests might acquire, rather than something that most creative practices have yet to take on board. As I will suggest further along, one thing these initiating premises have accomplished is to elicit a very robust response from some of Canada's premiere artists in their fields and finding the right invitation was crucial to this end.

There are, however, *within* creative processes this premise displays interesting implications for the larger interest of entering and existing within a post-normal world, free of absolute truth. This begins with the way the premise 'art as epistemology' unfurls in a kind of layered deployment. To begin with, 'epistemological' is not a word with much immediacy to it outside academic contexts, and not something many of us can typically assume as behaviour. Thus 'art as epistemology' is perhaps just a fancy way of describing creative practices characterized by inquiry. As we have seen in each of the commissions, 'creativity as inquiry' necessarily

provokes an awareness of, and responsiveness to, distributed agency, other human and non-human agencies that influence the direction of the inquiry. This ‘distributed agency’ works in a Latourian ‘actor-network’ fashion by ‘flattening ontology’ to place humans, buildings, ideas, histories, associations, funding opportunities, etc. all on the same playing field where they can enter into a network of relationships allowing the work to emerge from within. This obviously entails a deep encounter with ‘emergent dynamics’, characterizing the kind of interactivity that occurs within such an enfranchised immanent network. Practically speaking, emergent dynamics are what creativity as inquiry must learn to manage within this modality.

In practice, *creativity as inquiry* trades authorial autocracy, a sense of creativity as ‘God-like’, for an aesthetic acuity, a sensitivity to the world in performance of itself as something to be captured through aesthetic form. Devised theatre, for example, illustrates an inquiring posture that incorporates the *distributed agency* of human and non-human actors within the creative process and uses *emergent dynamics* to build work from within immanent circumstances. If the challenge of sustainability is in part a challenge to give meaningful presence to the non-human within human representation and deliberation, aesthetic inquiry and its practices may serve as practical traditions from which to glean valuable experience. In other words, I suggest that ‘creativity as inquiry’ offers insight into the practical challenges associated with prescriptive engagements with Latour, Actor-Network Theory, and a metaphysics of immanence. It is a way of shifting from descriptive accounts with Latourian ideas, which are relatively common, towards prescriptive practices, which seem typically elusive.

7.4.5 A metaphysical implication

But as we saw in the discussion of the IPCC, where emergent outcomes were ultimately lambasted by an unsympathetic public, this shift may not be terribly successful unless we take on board its essential corollary: If creativity is inquiry, then inquiry is creative. In other words, the idea of art as epistemological has important ontological implications, something we might explore through a proof of sorts. The initial conjecture at the outset of this chapter begged the question, how many of us have had a transformative experience of art? An experience whereby our sense of self and world has shifted through an artistic encounter? If this number is as significant as I assume it to be (as reflected in the rich and long-standing literature citing the ontological agency of art) then the question follows: What, then, is our world made of if it is malleable at the hands of metaphor, pattern, image, form, rhythm, or melody? What are our worlds, our realities, if the stuff of art can transform them? How does a materialist metaphysics remain so instinctively entrenched alongside such a widespread account of art’s ontological agency? This is surely one of the heftier paradoxes within late Modernism.

If art holds ontological agency over our worlds, then surely our worlds are not made of anything that would conform to absolute or objective descriptions. They must, to a substantive degree, be made from expressive, performative agencies operating within the affordances of our conceptual, imaginative, epistemic, ontological, metaphysical frameworks. If this idea runs too counter to one's realism, then one has either not had such an encounter with art or is willing to give up its weight and meaning in favour of a redoubled belief in objectivity. The rest of us should be free to live in a world that emerges from an aesthetic awareness without hedging that world as a second-class view of our reality, and instead exposes fundamental condition of world-making.

That is to say, the efforts of the four artists working within the epistemic premise are an engagement with the larger challenge of figuring out how we proceed in the world once our aspirations towards absolute descriptions have expired. Yet beyond making recommendations for *how* to live in a post-normal world, they also offer a compelling encounter with the idea that we *do*. The premise of art as epistemology frames the creative enterprise in a way that steps us back from authorial autocracy, orients us to the agency of the 'others', challenges our structural capacities to include an ever-widening multiplicity of creative voices. Practically this might be considered the challenge to enact, structure, and manage the emergent dynamics of a given context. Ontologically it begs deep questions regarding the status of worlds made by our own hands, embedding what I expect will emerge as a fundamental paradox of the non-Modern world, the trick of listening with our languages.

As we have seen in the commissioned works, the epistemic premise arrives at emergent dynamics rather naturally, but leaves it up to the artists themselves to calibrate and manage them. Used well, they create explicit room for immanent, interactive processes and help invite an integration of multiple voices, while at the same time offering increasing validity to the outcomes of such interactions. But they cannot offer us immunity from ourselves. To hope for as much, I suggest, is Modernist nostalgia. They cannot purify processes of meaning-making to the degree that we can step away in the hopes of naturalizing such outcomes as 'findings'. We are makers, and must not dodge the existential burden of that condition. We can distribute agency, but we cannot abandon it. We can continue to grow and animate our democracies, but we cannot stop authoring them. This is the full range of the coming paradox we must learn to inhabit.

7.5 Art as meta-agent: imaginative context vs. concrete particulars

The last premise with which I began this exploration into the prescriptive conditions of art-sustainability interactions is the issue of 'imaginative context vs. concrete particulars'. The idea here was that in order for art to undertake a healthy prescriptive engagement with some non-aesthetic concern, we should first establish

the imaginative context surrounding that concern—the conceptual dimensions that produce what that thing is for us—and use that as the ‘site of engagement’, rather than messing around with the thing itself. If we can change the framing conditions within which an object is produced for a given context, then that is a more promising leverage point.

The goal here was to push artistic engagement away from didactic burdens, i.e. communicating facts, as part of the larger goal of moving engagement away from the burden of illustration towards the opportunity to inquire. This may sound somewhat redundant given the lengthy discussion of the epistemic premise, but the difference was illustrated in Kaplan’s approach to the commission. The work he undertook to examine the relationship between worldview and the present state of green design was precisely the kind of initiating analysis this premise has in mind. It is a recommendation to invite the creative process to step back, to take a fresh look at the encompassing imaginative context within which a phenomenon occurs and consider those often invisible forces as prime leverage points for change.

In part, this recommendation stems from previously cited arguments that artistic languages can access worldviews in ways that other capacities lack. Given arguments that the environmental crisis was itself fundamentally a crisis of worldview, this seemed the ideal nexus to improve the art-sustainability relationship. However, if the epistemic premise is already in place, I worry this recommendation as a prescriptive premise goes too far, dictates too much, and might prove unhelpful. Insisting that artists commit to this kind of analysis may be helpful (in the case of Kaplan it seemed instinctual) but it is not the only way to engage worldview, particularly within artistic practices. Beyond such philosophical analysis, if dimensions of worldview can be found at all, surely they are to be found in concrete particulars themselves. And of course it is the framing conditions, the emphases and blindnesses worldviews produce *about* particulars that the arts are often so deft at exposing.

Take, for example, the nature-culture dilemma as it was illustrated by McKay’s poem about his rocking chair. The object in question sets up a sense of constant oscillation, rocking back and forth, but then sets this motion against the backdrop of the chair’s different caretakers all attempting to purify the object according to some well-meaning cultural definition of ‘natural’. McKay never raises the nature-culture dilemma directly, but rather lets it loom larger and larger in the background of the poem itself, its incoherence growing more evident as the chair evolves into something of a tortured symbol of our own inability to navigate by this absent star. This strikes me as a good example of how the arts do their work at meta-levels by drawing from the particular, a kind of Socratic seduction that offers a beguiling contrast to any analytical proposition to our rational faculties. It’s a worthwhile caution. Any premise that suggests that the arts should reside or even

begin explicitly in the meta-realm of worldviews could be counterproductive, as awkward an agenda as any political or behavioural ambition.

I think what may have saved this from becoming too problematic was the ‘light touch’ approach taken by the commission in general. The commission laid out very specific content in terms of Modernism, subject-object dualism, Heidegger’s notion of ‘Being’, Latour’s account of hybrids and the absence of any nature/culture divide, and the relevance of such themes to sustainability. During the initial interview processes, however, the goal was to follow the artists as they made their own connections between this idea, and their own practices. These early interviews purposefully supported each of the artists’ own efforts to make sense of the commission content on their own terms. Looking back I think this was extremely important to lighten what could have been a problematic weight of an agenda on the creative process. In other words, this helped position the commissioning material as something to think with, a way of looking at sustainability, rather than insoluble content for illustration in the aesthetic.

Positioning the commissioning material in this way allowed an emergent dynamic to exist between it and the artistic uptake. For McKay and his field of poetry, themes of Modernism and subject-object dualism were most present in how language maps the other, the problems that this raises (i.e. map-territory issues), and the aesthetic practices that might serve to address them (the use of language to demonstrate its own inadequacy). For Kerr and the world of theatre, Modernism and subject-object dualism show up most clearly in how theatre positions the audience relative to the art. The existence of the famous ‘fourth wall’ that a traditional audience can see through, that actors can speak through, but that neither can cross in any way. For Giorgio and music-making within a Western, ‘classical’ vein, this commission was fundamentally about the creative process, finding ways to reverse the causal arrow in the creation of music, and, by extension, what music is.

In the case of Kaplan’s architectural work, as we saw, the commission seemed to serve more as an analytical analogy, a model for how one might structure one’s understanding of environmental problems. Where I drew a connection between Modernism and sustainability using Latour and Heidegger, Kaplan drew connections between Capitalism and sustainability, using Habermas instead. As discussed in chapter 6, this may have worked out for the best as he was able to work with the commission in ways that inspired his own artistic preoccupations. Something I took from this experience was the idea that a commissioning process should perhaps endeavour to set the spirit of engagement as much as any specific terms of engagement, in this case providing the invitation to think about sustainability in this sort of way and produce an aesthetic response at this level of analysis—worldviews, framing conditions, etc.

My revised sense of this premise allows me to relax a bit in terms of how much effort I was making to protect the freedom and integrity of artistic processes. At this point, I do not feel it is quite so necessary to fence off particular content (i.e. the arts must be about worldviews) providing the epistemic premise is solidly in place. If the nature of engagement is understood to be an exploratory, emergent inquiry, then this should provide the bulwark against the problematic instrumentalism I was trying to buffer with this idea of ‘worldviews not particulars’. Further, I think once something becomes the content of a commission, it doesn’t matter how abstract it is, it becomes ‘particular’ nonetheless and carries all the same threats to creativity as more concrete material. And so more crucial than distinguishing types of content is the enfranchisement of the artistic process and the spirit with which the material is presented.

7.6 A few points of clarification

At the outset of the study, I accused a prominent strain of the art-sustainability relationship of being the wrong invitation, the wrong way to structure the interaction. The commission that was developed was an attempt to improve on this point. However, this engagement with art is not an attempt to make universal statements about what art is, or what art is for, or how to use art. It is a much narrower discussion, an exploration of how to structure prescriptive engagements within a particular domain of artistic practice. This domain I have tried to identify both in social, historical terms, i.e. Western, classical, European, etc., and in terms of ‘principles of practice’, where aesthetic, imaginative, expressive priorities take precedence over research goals, social objectives, or behavioural outcomes. My concern lies with art as a professional practice connected to an industry of consumption—artists who make a living making art, rather than those who pursue larger social goals using artistic idioms, languages, and practices.

Over the course of this study, I have grown less defensive towards these broader, socially motivated practices, as they are, after all, usually more democratic, inclusive, therapeutic, and socially conscious than their aesthetically-devoted counterparts. I remain eager to clarify what is at stake within the art practices with which I am familiar, which I believe to be those usually in question when Western scholarship has historically referred to artistic agency, and which I felt were poorly understood by various practitioners seeking to capitalize on them. This work is an effort to find their role within present social challenges and establish optimal conditions within which they might fulfill it. Following Steiner, Bachmann, Marcuse, and others I do believe that the integrity of artistic practices remain vulnerable when engaging non-aesthetic concerns, with either ontological or behavioural agency in mind. However, the goal here is not to prevent such engagement—I have no interest in making an ‘autonomy of art’ argument—but to learn to do it better.

The burden of this research was to first try and understand what this ontological agency consists of, and second, try and offer some useful work in figuring out how best to preserve such agency as it engages the non-aesthetic. The paradox is immediate. If ontological agency rests on a priority of the aesthetic, how can it take aim at (i.e. make a priority of) a non-aesthetic concern? Reconciling this paradox forms the prescriptive challenge inherent in seeking ontological agency via artistic engagement. The difficulty in doing so, I believe, is why the ontological agency of art remains so elusive, and why a descriptive engagement with artistic agency may be commonplace, while a prescriptive engagement so intractable.

Trying to evaluate the prescriptive premises of this commission raises a shortcoming of a study like this. While this was an attempt to gain some empirical experience with the concerns raised in the theoretical framework, it was not a proper experiment as such. It did not attempt to isolate variables such that we can describe their role in prescriptive engagement in cause-effect terms. It did not establish control groups that would allow us to compare the presence/absence of various prescriptive conditions. I can't imagine how this would work in an artistic context, where isolating any process is the opposite of what artistic endeavours are all about and processes are intentionally not repeatable, making this kind of causal determination impossible. Any effort to establish such linear certainties would create such unnatural, unidiomatic conditions that it would teach us nothing about art making practices whatsoever.

Instead, I am left with my instincts and experience as a working artist, filtered through a body of theoretical engagement with artistic activities (or perhaps the other way around). This has formed a set of interests and instincts through which I am attempting to understand the relationship between the prescriptive premises, commissioning process and the resulting works—either what such a prescriptive approach preserves (i.e. standards of artistic practice that need to be maintained); what it inspires (new ways of positioning artistic practice relative to non-aesthetic concerns); and what it impedes (inevitable hindrances of any prescriptive agenda within creative processes). Through this process I have attempted to find some clarity on a number of ideas that were either part of the initiating framework, or emerged during the work in the hopes of understanding how to better the role of artistic agency within larger social concerns.

The distinction I offer between ontological agency and behavioural agency is not intended to rank or segregate one from the other. It is merely intended to clarify the difference between the two ambitions and inspire the necessary procedures that might enlist one or the other. As an idea that didn't really form until relatively late in the research process, I feel there is a lot of worthwhile work to be done refining the distinction, and then elaborating various procedural commitments that either ambition implies. Again, the hope is that better clarity on the matter affords better practice.

Proposing the theoretical category ‘artistic ontology’ may not be useful to anyone else besides myself, I can only say I would have found some sort of umbrella extremely helpful at the front end of this research. Again, the more clarity, structure, and depth we can give to an understanding of what is a prevalent yet scattered view of artistic agency the more effective any prescriptive engagements with it might be. The idea came in reflecting on the commissioned works and remains nascent here. I feel a fair bit of work remains in refining the category at a theoretical level in terms of what it is attempting to illustrate. Perhaps equally important, I suggest it would be worthwhile to undertake some kind of ethnographic research to collect and catalogue phenomenological engagements with the idea. This, of course, is that empirical backfilling begged by my continued conjecture that increasing prescriptive aspirations towards artistic agency are rooted in people’s memories of how art impacted their own lives.

Any empirical link I have attempted to establish between ontological agency and an aesthetic priority is obviously not conclusive, but hopefully illustrative of a relationship. This was structural in the example of McKay, by which I mean metaphors do not cross that linguistic boundary, do not take us to that point of new realization, unless they ‘resonate’, unless they are aesthetically successful. And it was at the very least practical in the case of Giorgio’s musical intervention, where a behavioural priority replaced an aesthetic priority in order to extend a level of creative agency in more democratic, interactive ways. Such agency never materialized.

I have spent a long time trying to figure out what is reasonable to extrapolate from this. Can we go so far as to say that an outright dismissal of the aesthetic priority renders any behavioural process inert? That a ‘post-aesthetic’ artist is an artist without agency at all? Certainly art that has *bumbled* its aesthetic aspirations in favour of social values demonstrates agency in many different directions.²⁹³ However, I do remain suspicious about the full cost of abandoning an aesthetic priority outright. As I have tried to illustrate, there is a crucial difference between a singular priority of an aesthetic *product*, and more democratic, socially minded engagements with aesthetic *processes*. This is the ontological-behavioural distinction. Neither of these approaches would describe themselves as ‘post-aesthetic’, at having arrived at creative processes where the aesthetic is of no concern at all. Behavioural agency pursued through a community-arts project surely finds benefit in a bunch of amateurs sitting around a table *trying* to create something beautiful, however critical someone like me might be of the outcome. Beauty may not emerge in the product, but it is there in the invitation, and it is there in the desire to find, express, and share it, and the belief in the importance of *actively creating* a beautiful world.

²⁹³ In addition, I should probably break ranks here for a moment and confess that the festival I run has several streams of activities that are explicitly community-arts directed. They are prime examples of offering very modest artistic products but carrying out what I find to be valuable artistic processes. The distinction I will keep trying to clarify is that the agency of such processes lies less in the art and more in the social circumstances its processes enact. Worthwhile without a doubt, yet distinct nonetheless.

So what to say about an artistic process that explicitly dismisses the importance of an aesthetic outcome outright? Based on a very limited encounter with the ‘post-aesthetic’ my tentative suggestion is that abdicates both categories, ontological and behavioural. However, this is very preliminary, and begs much further research into other artists who practice within a self-described ‘post-aesthetic’ phase (e.g. Suzi Gablik). I flag it here because if it were to turn out to be an adequate characterization of post-aesthetic work more generally, I think it has important ramifications for my understanding of behavioural agency sought through the arts. Recall that in the methodology chapter I characterized art practices aimed at behavioural agency as synonymous with game playing. Yet it now seems this is quite wrong. Remove the ambition towards aesthetic value (that *does* exist in behavioural agency art practices) and it becomes clear that such an aspiration towards the aesthetic *matters*, beyond whatever elements it may share with game playing, i.e. togetherness, kindness, expression, etc.

The premise that art is epistemological and must be granted such status in prescriptive processes was perhaps the richest outcome for me in reflecting on the commissioning process. This seemed particularly fruitful in the way the idea cascaded within its practical engagements, from epistemology to inquiry to distributed agency to emergent dynamics. The unfolding layers suggest a very deeply rooted relationship with creative practice more generally, that is, even more intrinsic than I had suspected. Art isn’t just epistemological in its capacity, but in its very nature. Creativity is inquiry in the most substantive of ways. In the chapter that follows, this idea will be explored relative to its larger relationship with the content of the commission itself, the hope of using art as a means to navigate our way out of the tangles of Modernism.

7.7 The right invitation?

At the outset of this study I characterized the present relationship between art and sustainability as featuring the right instinct with the wrong invitation. What followed was an attempt at forging a different sort of invitation, one characterized as an autonomy of process without an autonomy of purpose. That is, a way of trying to ‘use art’ without being instrumental about it (or at the very least minimize and confess the hypocrisy therein). The ‘right invitation’ was pursued here as something that tries to respect the values and virtues intrinsic to the artistic traditions I was seeking to engage. That is, what is it that is important to the artists? How do we structure an invitation that does not compromise this? As I have said in different ways throughout this discussion, as an artist I am excited by the growing enthusiasm for the arts within research and policy communities, but I remain wary of non-aesthetic traditions and interests that seek to appropriate the artistic voice without much effort to understand or respect it.

Whether or not the invitation forged here was ‘the right way’ to engage the artistic community, what is clear is that the response it engendered from four highly accomplished artists was extraordinarily robust, rigorous, and deeply engaged. For example, Don McKay told the audience at the Vancouver International Festival of Writers and Readers (where ‘Thingamajig’ was premiered) that he took the commission based on the account of art that was embedded within it, offering the following introduction to his reading:

I was impressed by David Maggs’ comprehensive view of the arts, and their engagement with environmental issues. The arts can be a great medium for carrying a message of environmental concern or ringing the alarm bell, and this is an important useful function. There is another function however, broader and slower, that has to do with the arts address to the style of our thinking as a culture, beyond the content. And I think David has nailed that in his materials around this project when he says this: We can think of art as “fundamentally about possibility and otherness, about luring the imagination into new ways of conceiving of self, other, and world”. It is that broad possibility I found exciting.

The poems McKay developed for the GCC are now published by McLelland and Stewart. McKay continues to read from the work and discuss the ideas he is attempting to grapple with.

This sustained and satisfying engagement was echoed by Kevin Kerr. Consider that the work Kerr and the Electric Company did for the GCC cost ten times the commission fee of \$8 000. Clearly the motivation to take up this project had little to do with the question of remuneration. In a recent and unsolicited email Kerr writes, “Getting to engage with you and your work was an absolute highlight of the process for me. I really enjoyed our conversations and how they challenged me in my thinking about the work.” So whatever works resulted from this approach to the art-sustainability relationship it seems clear that the commission approach created a level of engagement and sustained interest that I find remarkable. The invitation to grapple with questions of sustainability at this level (worldview, self-world relations, etc.), through an explicit enfranchising of the aesthetic process as fundamentally epistemic, has certainly confirmed itself as a very promising avenue for art-sustainability interactions.

Chapter 8: In search of the Anthropocene

8.1 A thorny path ahead

Triumph for this research would have resulted in nothing less than a rapture. The grip of an aesthetic encounter would strip us of our Modernism, shatter subject-object divisions, wrinkle scientific factuality with the topography of human activity, turn wild spaces into artifacts of human care, and expose the back alleys of urban heartland as the workshops of the non-human. Modernity would seem nothing more than the faint memory of an odd way of arranging things, a bastardizing account of being-in-the-world grown from an impoverishing ethos that had hung on too long. We would be singing to the non-human and non-material by now, listening for their echo in our voices, adjusting our pitch to hear them ring in our calls. We would slide effortlessly between different modes of understanding when engaging different facets of our lives, shifting criteria of felicity the way we shift speech idioms from one context to the next. And should interpretive conflicts arise, we would simply reconcile radically different modes of understanding through a simple application of...what?

Without any such triumph the hard question goes unanswered. For the most part, the journey towards this new world has been defined much more by where we are hoping to leave than where we are going. Has the Post-Modern ever managed to call itself anything other than that which comes after Modernity? Sylvio Funtowicz and Jerome Ravetz, leading figures in an epistemic critique of Modernism, eschewed the term 'Post-Modernity' thanks to its aura of "unrestrained criticism...[verging on] nihilism and despair."²⁹⁴ Various other labels have sprung up to prescribe what follows Modernity while trying to avoid taking on the baggage of the post-modern. The "Post-Normal" (coined by Funtowicz and Ravetz) began as a label to describe scientific contexts operating outside the assumptions of Modernity, but has been recalibrated to evoke the age more generally.²⁹⁵ Latour's 'Non-modernism' was used to avoid what he described as the "always perverse" nature of the Post-Moderns²⁹⁶, although in more recent work, both he and many others have adopted Paul Crutzen's *Anthropocene* as a broader emblem of this emerging age.²⁹⁷

For our purposes these terms have enough in common to be largely interchangeable. The central features shared by each label are the collapse of the fact-value divide, the implosion of subject-object boundaries, and the incoherence of the nature-culture distinction. Each is characterized by *complexity*, identifying a globalized

²⁹⁴ Sylvio O. Funtowicz and Jerome R. Ravetz. "Science for the Post-Normal Age." 739-740.

²⁹⁵ Ziauddin Sardar. "Welcome to Postnormal Times." *Futures* 42. 2010. 436.

²⁹⁶ Latour, 1993. 123.

²⁹⁷ A quick google of 'the Anthropocene' turns up a surprising number of articles (fill in) attesting to the rising popularity of the term along with an increasing awareness of a larger paradigmatic shift.

interconnectedness of most problems and their potential solutions—“nothing exists or happens in isolation”²⁹⁸; *uncertainty* with regards to how knowledge is produced, what omissions it may contain, and what effects it might have on the ‘object’ in question—“ignorance has come back with a vengeance”²⁹⁹; and *humility*, at the built-in awareness of these epistemic limitations.³⁰⁰ Themes of ‘emergence’ and ‘interactivity’ evoke a wider recognition of the multiplicity of agencies involved in the production of non-modern, post-normal phenomena.

Lastly, there seems often to be a descriptive/prescriptive ambiguity within these territories. Authors of the post-normal, non-modern, Anthropocene world seem to be simultaneously re-describing present and past realities through a more encompassing lens, leading us to believe that we have, without realizing it, been living in a non-modern, post-normal world all along, while at the same time anticipating and prescribing the world we must enact.³⁰¹

8.2 A metaphysics of immanence

8.2.1 The end of the old redemption

Following Latour and Rorty, amongst others, I have tried to ascribe a metaphysical quality to this transition. Specifically, a shift from a metaphysics of transcendence to a metaphysics of immanence. As discussed at length elsewhere, what I mean by a metaphysics of transcendence includes the separations described above: between facts and values, subjects and objects, cultures and natures, such that it can arrive at ultimate and eternal truths independent of human values and perspectives. Our task is only to discover, describe, promote, and acquiesce. Truths such as these, as Rorty labels them, are *redemptive*, something I suggest can be usefully thought of as both free, in that it ‘costs nothing’ for it to be true (more on this in a moment), and freeing, in that we can sit back and bathe in the light of its clarity, no more to worry at purposes, virtues, meanings, and the like.³⁰² Where once such truth arrived via revelation, Rorty’s last bastion of redemptive truth remains materialist metaphysics or the absolute descriptions of the material world borne of experimental science. Here, the transcendence of Modernism rests on the notion that humanity has succeeded in extracting the

²⁹⁸ Sardar, 2010. 437.

²⁹⁹ J.R. Ravetz. “Postnormal Science and the maturing of the structural contradictions of modern European science”. *Futures*. September, 1993. 143.

³⁰⁰ Sardar, 2010. 437.

³⁰¹ Alfonso Montuori. “Beyond postnormal times: The future of creativity and the creativity of the future.” *Futures*. March, 2011. Volume 43, Issue 2. 222.

³⁰² There is of course, the opposite association with a redemptive truth, that rather than freeing it is deeply constricting in that it eliminates any freedom to wonder at different possibilities for one’s self and world. The interpretation I am putting forward is an attempt to align the idea of redemptive truth with the way materialist metaphysics (scientific dictates) entered public discourse through the Enlightenment, a freeing, emancipatory presence of truth.

human from human understanding, accessing Nagel's famous 'view from nowhere', that capacity to describe the way the world is whether we are there to know that it is like that or not.

But of course the last half of the twentieth century has not been kind to such hope. From within its own ranks experimental procedures in a variety of fields (perception, linguistics, and quantum physics to name a few) have done much to undermine the Modernist view by demonstrating an inseparability between subject and world. Our realities are inextricably our own it would seem. What we experience as 'the world' is substantively determined by what we carry around in our heads, a hopelessly subjective enterprise.

From beyond scientific disciplines, projects such as Latour's work within the field of Science Studies have done much to erode the assumptions supporting the viability of the redemptive truths of a Modernist, materialist metaphysics. The aim here is to realize that so-called redemptive truths are *not* free (nor freeing either). That however much we may relate to them as transcendent, as eternal, and absolute, that is, however much we may wish to believe that their existence is irrelevant to our own animating acts of belief, there is a clear cost to their presence in our worlds. Learning to 'pay the cost' of our truths is the corrective that would transition us from a metaphysics of transcendence to a metaphysics of immanence.

8.2.2 Paying the cost

We might take this cost to have both capital and operational portions. The capital phase of truth (to use the scientific illustration) is what Latour and colleagues have spent a long time recreating in sciences labs that formed their primary field of inquiry for an anthropological engagement with Modernism. Here the assumptions, beliefs, funding priorities, instrumentation, techniques, negotiations, and agreements amongst researchers are the inputs that are inseparable from a given description of reality. What Latour has variously described as the 'mediations' or, more recently, the 'chains of reference', these actor-networks establish an interdependence between the resultant insight and the means by which it was gained.

Operationally speaking, as we have already seen in Latour's arguments presented at the outset of this study, truth cannot live on the pages of a research diary alone. The metabolism of an idea exceeds such quiet. Heliocentrism lives on the meals of its adherents, on the funding of its libraries, webpages, models, and compliant research programs and their practitioners. When Latour 'flattened ontology', declaring the singular criteria for existence to be the capacity to enter relationships with other actors, suddenly stones, comic book characters, presidents, microbes, and tooth fairies share a singular ontological condition, a single way of being:

existence via a network of alliances maintained by the active participation of its members. For truth to exist it must find itself in relationship to its believers, otherwise it returns to dust.³⁰³

What irony, then, that the reaction to Science Studies was diametrically opposite to this conviction. Once the mediations beneath a given scientific truth were exposed, once its chains of reference were reattached, *this made its existence impossible*.

It happens every time: as soon as you draw up the list of the ingredients necessary for the production of objectivity, your interlocutors feel—they can't help themselves, it's too much for them—that objectivity is *diminished* rather than increased...there is no positive version that lets you say about some bit of knowledge in a single breath that it is proven and that it depends on a fragile progression of proofs along a costly chain of reference that anything at all may interrupt.³⁰⁴

Truth in a metaphysics of transcendence cannot abide relationship, in a metaphysics of immanence, it cannot do without. The difficulty shifting from the former to the latter lies partly with the instinct to think of the 'constructed' in terms of the materialism vs. idealism debate:

If it is impossible to link manufacture and reality without shocking the practitioners, it is because there is in the very notion of construction...something that has gone very wrong. How can one do justice to the sciences if the deployment of their chains of reference looks like a scandal to those charged with setting them up?³⁰⁵

8.2.3 A composite view of construction

In his most recent work, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (2013), Latour seeks to reposition the idea of the construction (social, scientific, or otherwise) of various aspects of our realities. For a metaphysics of immanence to take hold, we must learn to live alongside the chains of reference that deploy our beliefs, to appreciate our own animating agencies at work within that which we hold to be true. Or, to hearken back to the commissioning document behind this research, we must appreciate ourselves as implicated subjects in the composition of our realities.

³⁰³ Where Latour replaces objectivity as a transcendent truth with a notion of objectivity inseparable from its immanent mediations, or chains of reference, Rorty makes a very similar move, replacing objectivity with the similarly actor-dependent 'intersubjectivity'. See "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre", p.21; and *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 385.

³⁰⁴ Latour, 2013. 154.

³⁰⁵ Latour, 2013. 153.

The necessary shift entails transforming our sense of what it means to say something is ‘constructed’ from a diminishing, critical engagement (meaning ‘not really real’, or worse, *arbitrary*, the result of exclusively human whim, idiom, habit, interest, etc.) into an additive quality, one that *increases* attachment and integration with our realities. The irony here being that the dominant idiom for ‘construction’ is just the opposite: that of deconstruction, as Latour says, “a tool for critique”.³⁰⁶

The interest here is to understand construction in such a way as to implicate us as subjects in our realities, while at the same time expanding that view away from easy relativism. “*Because it is well constructed, it may therefore be quite true.*”³⁰⁷ To this end Latour offers a view of construction as built from three necessary steps. First, a doubling, “during which the precise source of action is lost.”³⁰⁸ This doubling displaces a sense of a singular, linear authorship, the idea that action emanates from a single ‘doer’. Instead, an initiating agency enlists a wider range of other agencies in the pursuit of some goal:

If you read in your Latin grammar that “*Caesar pontem fecit*”, you know that the divine Julius himself did not transport the beams that were to span the Rhine, but you also know for certain that his legionnaires would not have transported them without his orders. Every use of the word “construction” thus opens up an *enigma* as to the author of the construction: when someone acts, *others* get moving, *pass into action*.³⁰⁹

The sense of distributed action explored under the banner of ‘art as epistemology’ in the previous chapter, bears this out rather well. Whether we are talking about *Kaplan* shaping the stone or *Kerr* creating a scene, or *McKay* coming up with an image, in each case their initiating ideas throw immediately to the agencies of parametric modeling, actors interpretations, or the denotations and connotations of available terms. In all cases, as was evident, it is important to note that the doubling is never a perfect manifestation, but is always the act of translation, always a throwing of a creative impulse into a different set of capacities, possibilities, etc. For example the nuance of available words, the body language of a particular actor, or the endless surprises Kaplan experienced every time he saw his designs manifest in his digital models.

This invariably leads to Latour’s second feature of construction, once agency is multiplied, “the direction of the vector becomes uncertain.” In other words, the subject-object placeholders become volatile, i.e. the model provokes the architect instead of the other way around.

³⁰⁶ Latour, 2013. 154.

³⁰⁷ Latour, 2013. 157.

³⁰⁸ Latour, 2013. 157.

³⁰⁹ Latour, 2013. 158.

We find the clearest instance of this oscillation pushed to an extreme with marionettes and their operators, since there can be no doubt about the manipulator's control over what he manipulates: yes, but it so happens that his *hand* has such autonomy that one is never quite sure about what the puppet "makes" his puppeteers do, and the puppeteer isn't so sure either... We find the same uncertainty in the laboratory: it takes time for colleagues to decide at last whether the artificial lab experiment gives the facts enough autonomy for them to exist "on their own" "thanks to" the experimenter's excellent work.³¹⁰

As the translation of creative gesture into its medium (model, actor, word) these do not remain 'effects'. Instead, the arrow whirls around at this point, its instigator (Kaplan, Kerr, McKay) in its sights. Effect becomes cause, the unpredictable result of a particular decision demands the initiating gesture now respond to the myriad agencies that have transformed its initiating impulse. Multiplying the source of the action (the first criterion) creates a conversation within layered agencies through a suddenly spinning causal arrow (the second criterion).³¹¹

The third, and what Latour calls the "most decisive" of his composite notion of construction is, I am happy to say, *quality*. "It is not enough for Balzac to be carried away by his characters, he still has to be *well* carried away; it is not enough for the experimenter to construct the facts through artifices; the facts still have to make him a *good* experimenter."³¹² The distinction here is that, even once causality is made problematic (multiple, ambiguous sources of action), there is the need for resonance. There remains the stubborn difference between getting it right and getting it wrong. "Every architect, every artist, even every philosopher has known the agony of that scruple; every scientist wakes up at night tormented by this question: But what if it were merely artifact?" What if, in other words, it is *only* the result of my experiment, of my vision, what if the action has *not* multiplied? How will I know? As Latour argues, "the huge difference between making something well, and making it badly."³¹³ Or what I referred to as 'resonance' heretofore.

³¹⁰ Latour, 2013. 158.

³¹¹ I myself find illustration of this in my compulsion, when faced with a particularly thorny concept, to turn from writing on the computer to using pen and ink. Why? Is it simply a learned habit with no substantial differences I am responding to? Latour's construction offers a different possibility. For me, pen and ink embeds greater agency than pixels as the flow of ink on paper can provoke and track more agencies than dots on a screen. My arm with pen in hand is less predictable than hitting the 'r' somewhere on its square, allowing every different 'r' I write by hand to play with this oscillating vector of agency. The differing shapes of the same letter become articulate, reflecting differing variables within me, while demanding a different quality of attention in response furthering the unpredictability of where this simple gesture might lead, all of which is rationalized out of existence in the world of digital type.

³¹² Latour, 2013. 159

³¹³ Latour, 2013. 159.

8.2.4 Instauration (*encountering beings capable of worrying you*)

Latour encapsulates this sense of construction with a term borrowed from French philosopher Etienne Souriau, *instauration*.³¹⁴ Similarly, instauration attempts to capture that ambiguity of agency. The creator is not the sole creative agency, though the work would not proceed without her or him. Secondly, there is no map, no transcending form to guide the pursuit.

Everything depends on what you are going to do next, and you alone have the competence to do it, and *you don't know how*... You're not in control, and yet there's no one else to take charge. It's enough to make anyone wake up at night in a cold sweat. Anyone who hasn't felt this terror hasn't measured the abyss of ignorance at whose edge creation totters.³¹⁵

It is perhaps obvious how well this notion of instauration supports the sense of art as epistemological, a fundamentally responsive undertaking described elsewhere.

This pushes the argument further down thematic path I have been resisting, as it felt too imprecise and unlikely. Yet here it seems unavoidable. There is an ambiguity to creative work that may serve as something of a guiding paradox for non-modernism more generally. What I mean here is this sense of there being simultaneously 'nothing' (only the immanent agencies we can see and name before us) and yet undeniably 'something' (some transcendent muse, an ineffable spirit or essence?) to which the creative act is *responding*. If 'nothing' in this sense, then we should be able to reduce creativity to a materialist analytical task of 'following the actors', identifying the various agencies (human and non-human) in relationship to a creative undertaking in order to engage either descriptively or prescriptively with the activity.

And yet, at the same time, in this exploration of instauration Latour evokes agencies that become increasingly difficult to identify as specific actors. That is, actors that are harder to pin down and declare immanent to a given context. And yet, to my mind, this discussion captures the creative enterprise perfectly, adding further theoretical elaboration to what I have been proposing around notions of art as epistemology and aesthetics as a means of mapping the edges of our conceptual, linguistic worlds. In the words of Latour, "the act of instauration has to provide *the opportunity to encounter beings capable of worrying you*...

Beings whose ontological status is still open but that are nevertheless capable of *making you do* something, of unsettling you, insisting, obliging you to speak well of them...Articulate beings to

³¹⁴ Latour, 2013. 160.

³¹⁵ Latour, 2013. 161.

which instauration can add something essential to their autonomous existence. Beings that have their own resources. It is only at this price that the trajectories whose outlines we are beginning to recognize might have a meaning beyond the simply linguistic.³¹⁶

In other words, how can an actor-network analysis (a methodology for mapping the immanent world) ‘follow an actor’ if its ontological status is still open at the point of its relationship to the action? Articulable beings that would not exist without our articulations, that do so only once *we* have done so appropriately, once we have articulated them ‘correctly’, but that exist prior to such articulation nonetheless!

I am not trying to problematize these beings, in fact just the opposite, to name them in their paradoxical existence. The hope here is to explore the kind of problem they are for the larger proposal of an immanent metaphysics. Latour elaborates the notion of instauration:

On this account, [a sense of] the statue that awaits “potentially” in the chunk of marble and that the sculptor comes along to liberate cannot satisfy us. Everything would already be in place in advance, and we could only alternate between two bifurcated descriptions: either the sculptor simply follows the figure outlined in the detail in advance or else he imposes on the shapeless raw material the destination that he has “freely chosen”. No instauration would then be necessary...No, there have to be beings that escape both these types of resources: “creative imagination” on the one hand, “raw material” on the other. Beings whose continuity, prolongation, extension would come at the cost of a certain number of uncertainties, discontinuities, anxieties, so that we never lose sight of the fact that their instauration could fail *if the artist didn’t manage to grasp them according to their own interpretive key*, according to the specific riddle that they pose to those on whom they weigh; beings that keep on standing there, uneasy at the crossing.³¹⁷

Here it is this collaboration of agencies, the creative agency of the artist and the agency of the entity in question, that offers us a better glimpse of construction in a non-modern world. Crucially, such a dynamic refuses an excess of subjectivity or objectivity, the artist and the entity must collaborate. The world cannot descend into absolutism (eliminating the creative agency of the artist), nor can it deteriorate into idealism (eliminating the creative agency of the ‘object’, or entity in question).

In this I find fairly obvious support for the preceding section where I tried to link ontological agency with aesthetic priority. Recall the discussion of McKay’s metaphors. To capture something was to require its

³¹⁶ Latour, 2013. 161. This quote

³¹⁷ Latour, 2013. 161-162.

participating agency in the figurative language on offer. The rightness was resonance, a ‘humming along’ of the various agencies implicated, or as described above as the sense of ‘being in the right key’. Such ‘harmony’ entails the poet humming ‘E major’ and the bird having characteristics that can be harmonized by that key, allowing the audience to perceive the bird clarified and contextualized—though not exhausted—by E major.

What comes into sharper focus here is the sense of ‘making something well’ as not just a matter of arriving at a novel phrase or catchy image, but rather that any such ‘well-madeness’ is unavoidably collaborative. Once there is a multiplying of action and an oscillating vector of causal agency (ambiguous causality), we are left with a challenge of consensus building. There are many agencies that must participate in order for something to be well-made, McKay’s birds, Pasteur’s microbes, dare we say Webern’s overtone series?³¹⁸ “To receive the Nobel Prize, it is indeed the scientist herself who has acted; but for her to deserve the prize, facts had to have been *what made her act*” (my emphasis).³¹⁹

8.2.5 An immanent yet highly porous world?

What I had hoped would be a little clearer now is the question raised earlier as to whether the agency of art might be best understood as epiphenomenal. In other words, is it the agency of the painting (or more specifically, the *painter*), or the agency of the bird in the painting? Instauration speaks directly to this issue, although not in such a way as to resolve it in one direction or the other. Instead the description offers an image of continued tension, the necessary presence of the agency of each with neither subsuming the other.

This issue will resurface further along in the work of George Steiner. For now, I find it worth pointing out that while Latour is taking advantage of the language of aesthetics and imagery from art-making processes, he does so to illustrate a larger point about being-in-the-world. It is an attempt to illustrate an essential thread running through the modes of science, politics, law, religion, and therapy. All depend on this composite notion of construction, evoked here as instauration. Without instauration, without being able to multiply the action, oscillate the vector of cause-effect (or as I would say, make responsive, or, more precisely, epistemological), and verify in terms of well-madeness, such entities would break down.

In a surprising paragraph, Latour—one of the flag-bearers of the immanent world—returns to a notion of transcendence to describe the central nexus of instauration. These small ‘leaps’ that actors make translating

³¹⁸ This is a more controversial example that would appeal to the argument that the basic ingredients of music are physical properties of the material universe, in this case the frequencies of the overtone series (root, fifth, third, seventh) as a foundation for common practice harmony (tonic-dominant relationships).

³¹⁹ Latour, 2013. 158-159. “Facts” may be an unhelpful term in this quote, as it is surely the agencies that have been cooperative enough with the scientist’s descriptions *to be declared facts* that are intended.

one actant into another are described as a break in continuity, and—according to Latour—*a transgression of immanence?*

All modes can be said to be transcendent, since there is always a leap, a fault line, a lag, a risk, a difference between one state and the next, one mediation and the next, n and $n+1$, all along a path of alterations. Continuity is always lacking. There is nothing more transcendent for example, than geodesic reference points with respect to the readings jotted down by a surveyor-geometrician in his notebook...nothing more transcendent than the question of a single line of text proposed to the jury in a trial relating to the thousands of pages of a heavy dossier rolled on a trolley call the way to the court reporter [law]; nothing more transcendent than the relation between the lukewarm character of a perfunctory prayer and the gripping effect of grasping its meaning for the first time [religion]; nothing more transcendent than the relation between the papier-mâché stage setting and the exuberance of the characters that seem to emerge from it [fiction]; nothing more transcendent than the distance separating what you were from what you have become after being seized by a psychogenic being [metamorphosis]. Transcendences abound, since between two segments of a course of action there is always a discontinuity of which they constitute, as it were, the price, the path, and the salvation. These are what we must learn to name, every time.³²⁰

I find Latour unclear on the precise nature of these transcendences, so I am left following my intuition here more than I would like to. Nonetheless, I take the above quote to describe a metaphysics of immanence—the world composed by traceable networks—as pocked with gaps, necessary leaps wherein await beings that exist in ambiguous states, beings that we can lure into an emergent interaction with our creative capacities. (And, equally, which our creative capacities make us vulnerable to being lured toward). Indeed, what lies at the very heart of the act of instauration, is the yet-to-exist statue waiting in the space between sculptor and stone. This transcendent moment exists like a synaptic gap. It is that instant of all four legs being in the air, and in a sense then, the moment of maximal reactivity. All agencies are suspended, free to respond in unpredictable ways before being entangled in networks.

As far as my understanding goes, I see these transcendences as the moments in between our sending something out into the world, a metaphor, a design proposition, and its return in unpredictable form. I have tried to evoke the ‘agency of the aesthetic’ as a sort of non-absolute ‘truth-telling’ of pattern, form, image, harmony, colour, texture, melody, rhythm, the way these agencies respond and demand response is perhaps the best sense of that notion I offered in the opening pages of this dissertation, the ‘deep and mysterious

³²⁰ Latour, 2013. 210.

pools of the aesthetic'. As is evident, this vague idea is given some concreteness by Latour's account; only here he goes further, to evoke the deep and mysterious pools of legal traditions, religious institutes, and psychotherapy as well. Recall the image Kaplan produced through what were just a few of the iterations of the louvre he was attempting to create with perforated rock surfaces [figure 6.1]. The process involved an initial step of creating the pattern in stone and then waiting (usually overnight) for his software program to render the reaction from sunlight. I found it fascinating to discover that in every case he was taken by surprise at the response, it was never what he expected. For me, this illustrates what is at stake here, sending out a proposition, and awaiting the *translation* of it via the agencies at whom it is directed and via which it is sought (computer modeling, language, etc.).

The question remains as to how this resurgence of the language of transcendence affects Latour's prior admonition to "follow the actors". In other words, how this resurgence impacts the notion of immanence. What can we say about the ontological status of this kind of engagement, or the creative expressions that maintain their ambiguous status within the realm of experience? Does it return to immanence the way an astronaut returns to earth? Or is it irrevocably extra-terrestrial by then? In other words is it immanent all the same? Or is it unfair to say so, does it retain a kind of transcendence? How would we possibly know how to call it one or the other? Simply out of the quality of attention it commands? What political implications might this have? How might it function in contexts of dialogue and deliberation? Have we slipped transcendent signifiers—in their prohibited, Modernist sense—in through a window here? Or is this a viable peace with Modernity? And why is this important? These questions will be taken up in a discussion of art and sustainability shortly.

8.3 Practical outcomes from the research

For now, I would like to relieve any theoretical, conjectural strain (my own at least) and return to some concrete illustration of these ideas. Hopefully, a sharpened image of the non-modern will be a useful theoretical resource turning back to the GCC and the art channel. As discussed at the outset of this research, the art channel differed from the rest of the GCC. Rather than trying to engage specific issues of sustainability within a context of non-modernism (or procedural sustainability, to use the framing common to the group) the art channel tried to engage non-modernism itself. This exploration was based on a certain skepticism that we could step so easily into such a world (admittedly, along with a certain heroic sense that such metaphysical adventures are best left to the arts...)

Generally speaking, the hope of throwing some paradigm 'switch' that would turn off the Modern world and usher in new understandings of self, world, and other failed to materialize. Instead, a humbling process of

trying to move expressive idioms and languages from one conceptual framework towards another revealed a much more circuitous path ahead.

8.3.1 The Invisibles of Technology

Many of the humbling challenges to create these ordaining metaphors of an immanent world have been explored in the empirical chapters and opening section of the present chapter. The paradox of Don McKay's 'listening with language' is something he has been laboring over for decades and offered metaphorical gestures here that did not always land with their audience. Derek Kaplan's improbable resurrection of rock cut architecture as an integration of design instincts and advances in digital modeling would undoubtedly lead to a daunting exercise in 'emergent engineering', not to mention the practical challenges of public access discussed in chapter 6. The struggle that Kevin Kerr, David Hudgins, and the rest of the Electric Company went through to lift the immense weight of such widely distributed creative agency into a collective meaning-making enterprise was something that never really got off the ground, despite significant revisions and a complete remount. All this speaks to the difficult work that is involved in 'custom tool-building' when off-the-shelf models grow outdated.

Incidentally, underestimating the tool-building aspect was shared by some of the other Greenest City Conversation channels as well (for example, the mobile phone application designed to engage transportation use). Initially I took this to be nothing more than a practicality prone to misjudgment rather than a research outcome. However, after engaging Latour's notion of composite construction, and the nuanced notion of consensus building it entails, it seems there is more to this theme than I first considered. As Latour says,

The idea that one could deduce all the twists and turns of technological genius by always-well-formed *a priori* principles has always made engineers laugh—although not out loud. Isabelle Stengers had the idea of undertaking a radical thought experiment to reduce all technological inventions to the “basic principles” recognized by scientists and presented to students as “incontestable foundations”: reduced to the Carnot cycle, locomotives would immediately stop running; limited to the physics of lift, airplanes would crash; brought back to the central dogma of biology, the entire biotech industry would stop culturing cells. What have to be called the invisibles of technology—deviations, labyrinths, workarounds, serendipitous discoveries—would vanish, reducing the efforts of the sciences to nothing. No more invisibles, nor more domination.³²¹

³²¹ Latour, 2013.

This catches what seems to have been missed by some GCC researchers fairly generally, albeit in reverse, thinking we could derive engineering accomplishments from basic principles, as mistaken as thinking we could reduce them to basic principles.³²² Both directions fail to anticipate or account for the unpredictable agency of these ‘invisibles of technology’. Even after we have negotiated the principles of a given tool, technology, or dramaturgical approach, we underestimate the agency of concreteness, of materials. Symptomatic of Modernist sensibilities, we often fail to build consensus amongst the nuts and bolts.

This was illustrated in very simple terms from several of the commissioned works. Giorgio arrived on site to set up the video feedback components using large in-house screens that were part of the newly outfitted Centre for Interactive Research on Sustainability. Unfortunately no one could get the screens to work and as the only rehearsal on site was taking place the day of the performance, there wasn’t time to bring in any expert capable of addressing the problem. Instead precious dress rehearsal time was taken up wrestling with what are commonly referred to as ‘gremlins’ in the theatre tech world.³²³

The Electric Company example is slightly different. As discussed in chapter 4, detailed engagement with site is a significant portion of their approach to devised theatre, and it regularly ‘enters the negotiations’ of most Electric Company productions.³²⁴ The ‘nuts and bolts’ of a site are not only typically well respected within Electric Company procedures, but a sought after part of the creative process. Here Latour’s composite notion of construction (multiplying of agencies, oscillating causal vectors, criteria of quality) finds rich exemplification in the devising processes of the Electric Company.

What was interesting about *You Are Very Star* is that the initiating agency did not fail or forget to engage its site in this ‘consensus-building’ manner, but rather the site management that was surprised they wanted to. Recall the difficulties they encountered in trying to incorporate as many dimensions of the site as they could. Management clearly expected them integrate the particularities of the site much less than they hoped to do. So while we might accuse the Electric Company of failing to include political dimensions of the site as one of its inevitable ‘invisibles’, it is a insightful irony that such an ‘invisible’ only becomes a relevant agency with which they failed to negotiate thanks to their interest in negotiating with other typically invisible elements of the site.

³²² As GCC PI John Robinson points out, however, this was distinct from a different problem with tools, namely that researchers and research processes get fixated on them and fail to move on to the separate construction processes of application.

³²³ To me the term ‘gremlins’, commonly used by the tech departments of theatre and concert productions, highlights the very wisdom Latour is looking for in this notion of consensus building. Beyond everything working ‘in principle’, and having all the right gear, most technicians still leave an excess of time between set up and show time anticipating the unpredictable behaviour of these ‘invisibles of technology’.

³²⁴ *All the Way Home* set with the audience on the stage of the Queen Elizabeth Theatre; *Tear the Curtain* as a story that is both set in and about its commissioning playhouse – the Stanley; *The One That Got Away* is a play designed to take place in a swimming pool; and *the Wake*, a play developed specifically for False Creek, an outdoor site.

These ‘invisibles of technology’ or in the Electric Company example, what became an ‘invisible of politics’, are elements whose agency we should have planned for—and, by not doing so, will be surprised by—in the pursuit of our larger ambition. The ‘gremlins’ that inhabit the workspace of ‘techies’ in the theatre world are well respected. However unpredictable their presence may be, they are always incorporated into the procedures of a good tech’s development plan. Certainly this is a useful analogy for a much larger challenge of the non-modern world. Building adequate consensus within an appropriately bound system. Failing to do so inevitably leads to surprise, for a theatre company, an engineering project, or an ecosystem manager. It is a shortcoming that Latour continues to connect to our dysfunctional relationship to the more-than-human:

Technologies follow such a twisted path that they leave in their wake all sorts of other invisibles: danger, waste, pollution, a whole new labyrinth of unanticipated consequences opened up under our feet and whose very existence continues to be denied by those who think they can go directly ahead, without mediations, without running the risk of a lengthy detour, “straight to the goal.”³²⁵

One might go so far as to say the environmental crisis is precisely such a failure: A failure to build adequate consensus with the more-than-human world.

8.3.2 The Four-fold path

The expediency of heading ‘straight to the goal’ may be a casualty of a metaphysics of immanence. In a world built of explicit interactions of immanent agencies, the efficiency and autonomy of linear operations may have to be surrendered, along with the instincts that lie behind it. A very different set of instincts may be demanded when taking as given explicit processes of instauration and the emergent interactivity this entails. Drawing on observations of the Electric Company’s evolution, along with the two projects that attempted a degree of ‘substantive emergence’ (*You Are Very Star* and Giorgio’s *Teatre Dell’Udito CIRS*) I suggest that linear ‘developmental teleologies’ may need replacing by a different orientation. I offer a tentative outline of such a revised approach to structuring such non-modern developmental processes that breaks down into four basic steps (although I can foresee similar approaches conflating or expanding this basic sequence).

The first step, I would suggest involves a *provisional bounding of the system*. Can we identify the various agencies at play in a given context? Are there agencies present that we are not accounting for (e.g. the management of the MacMillan Space Centre, or the technologies involved in the display screens at CIRS)? What agencies

³²⁵ Latour, 2013. 221.

might we have missed given our general aspirations? Essential at this stage is making adequate room for gremlins, a ‘here be dragons’ humility that is typically absent from more linear procedures.³²⁶

Once a system is provisionally bound, I suggest an explicit *scan of the actors* is useful to map the various agencies as well as possible. Ideally, a process like this turns up the sort of surprise (Latour’s ‘invisible’) that was discovered mid-process by the Electric Company in their on-site development phase of *You Are Very Star*. For example, in including the star telescope platform as a performance site, all sorts of measurements were taken to define it as an actor within the system (height, circumference, sightlines, performer’s access, lighting requirements, etc.). What were missed were its political obligations, the managerial agencies that it inevitably admitted into the development process, to the great frustration of the team. Similarly, the display screens that were to be incorporated into the CIRS project were inadequately understood as well.³²⁷

With a provisional bounded-system in place, and a conscientious scan of the actors, the instaurator, the initiating agency might do well to *scope the project*. By this I mean what kind of timelines are entailed in the work and what outcomes can be anticipated. This, I think, is where we might have to accept that there is no fifth gear on the non-modern creative vehicles. The typical pace we might expect within an assumption that our maps are infallible allows us to skip from stone to stone without questioning whether one of them might be a crocodile instead. As we have seen over and over in this research, such certainty is no longer available, either because we have mistaken crocodiles for stones once too often, or because we keep turning stones *into* crocodiles through our various ways of tramping on them (see chapter 1).

For the Electric Company, Kerr greatly underestimated the amount of time it would take to foster a creative project out of the number of agencies included in the development. Similarly, both collaborating musicians interviewed about the music commission felt rehearsal time was inadequate to the goals of the project. Looking beyond creative projects, this is a common theme. John Robinson, whose investment in procedural approaches to sustainability has resulted in numerous large-scale interdisciplinary, interactive, emergent engagement projects, observes that *slowness* emerges as a fairly consistent feature of this type of work.³²⁸ Brian

³²⁶ In a personal communication Terre Satterfield notes here: "Although in modernist terms, would this be said to be covered under the rubric of uncertainty? Or am I giving too much latitude to what is normally called uncertainty? Even if I don't mean this in the sense of probabilities of uncertainty but ranges of plausibility within which much known and unknown might happen." This raises the complicated point of how much flexibility Modernist approaches (primarily those pursuing prediction and control) are learning to incorporate while still preserving the paradigm, a perspective form which accusations of strawmanning and iconoclasm might be launched at the present approach. How legitimately requires significant tangential, if worthwhile, effort.

³²⁷ An informative gaff from my own work comes from a development I was leading that involved live dancers on the surface of a pond (they were to be dancing on submerged platforms). Midway through the development process we discovered that the water height fluctuated as it was used as the water supply for an industrial process (paper mill). The timing of these fluctuations depended on a complex number of factors, production schedules, delivery deadlines, the arrival of ships in the bay, the arrival of wood trucks to the mill, and ultimately, during that summer, the highly charged political debate as whether or not to shut down one of four paper machines in the mill or to keep subsidizing the operation. Certainly we are not able to take all of this into account in negotiating with the ‘pond as actor’, but it demonstrates how much there is to learn about the agency of a supposedly inanimate actor in the process.

³²⁸ John Robinson, “Being undisciplined: Transgressions and intersections in academia and beyond”. *Futures* (2007). 83.

Wynne and colleagues in preparing a 2007 document on shifting European science, technology, and innovation out of its Modernist convictions make a similar point:

The regime of collective experimentation faces challenges because such embedded innovation is laborious, typically loosely-coordinated and slow; as it should be, because users and other stakeholders have their own contexts and logics to consider. Inspired by the slow food movement, one can now proclaim a ‘slow innovation’ program.³²⁹

Whether food, innovation, public engagement, academic research, or artistic pursuits, slowness may be an essential virtue of the non-modern world.

If this is so, I wonder at the shortcomings of both commissions that went in pursuit of substantive emergence, the use of emergent interaction to not only develop the project, but to occur as a feature of what the audience experienced *by* experiencing the project (again, *You Are Very Star* and *Teatre Dell'Udito CIRS*). In both cases, these works sought to integrate the agency of their audiences in the live moment of encounter within pieces that were between twenty minutes and an hour in duration. Despite very different approaches to structuring this interactivity, both examples seemed to come up short of the mark. Only now I wonder if time was a culprit here? Were the timeframes simply too compressed to allow this?

In Nicolas Bourriaud's discussion of relational art—art that features social interactions as intrinsic to its expressive qualities—the vast majority of the works discussed are gallery-based, typically installations. They may include elements of performance, but they are rarely bound by the idioms that govern the live experience of music or theatre. The works seem to draw primarily from visual art idioms and techniques.³³⁰ The overwhelming majority of these works exhibit a slower ‘expressive pace’, one set more by the audience than the performers. Perhaps that is a useful distinction between theatre, music, and gallery works—who sets the pace of consumption? In theatre and music it is almost exclusively the performers, in gallery works, by in large, the audience. A question that merits further investigation is whether interactive, emergent dynamics that attempt to include the audience, need to put the expressive pace of the work in the hands of the audience for it to flower. Certainly the comparison between *You Are Very Star* and *Sleep No More* identified precisely this distinction. The freedom that the latter appears to have acquired by shifting the pace of consumption and choice of experience into the audience's hands seems to free the creators from problematic burdens in the pursuit of audience interactivity.

³²⁹ Ulrike Felt, Brian Wynne, Michel Callon, et al. “Taking European Knowledge Society Seriously. Report of the Expert Group on Science and Governance to the Science, Economy, and Society Directorate, Directorate-General for Research, European Commission. 2007. 27. Available online at: http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/document_library/pdf_06/european-knowledge-society_en.pdf

³³⁰ See for example, the wiki page on ‘relational art’: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Relational_art

In both Giorgio's work, and in the Electric Company project, the interactivity was appreciated but underwhelming. In both cases it failed to offer real agency to the audience (and therefore create much impact). Our interactions did not *do* enough within the larger framework of meaning for either piece. Considering lessons from Latour, Robinson, and Wynne et al, that I wonder at this general tension between 'heading straight to the goal' and the slowness that immanence and emergence may require. Despite how much effort went into structuring the timing of the Electric Company's project, establishing time codes for audience movements to ensure one group intersected with another as planned, perhaps it is a very different consideration of time that remains absent from this project? Perhaps the kind of interactive agency being sought here necessarily demands the sort of slowness being recommended in other fields seeking comparable levels of interactivity?³³¹

This discussion may have already crossed into the fourth instinct I think might be a necessary element in replacing Modernist 'straight to the goal-ism'. Once the system is bounded, the actors scanned, and the project scoped, the step of *structuring the interactions* appears to be crucial. Here is where I think we have to step back from idealizing emergent interactivity, and form a 'national rifle association' view of the practice: emergent interactivity doesn't create meaning, people do. This may seem awfully deductive, top-down, and managerial to belong within this general shift towards inductive, bottom-up, emergent processes. However, having seen the two substantive emergent examples from this research, and comparing them with the previous work of the Electric Company along with Kerr's discussion of this evolution, padded by contributions from company members Kim Collier and David Hudgins, it seems unavoidable. The substantive benefit of emergent interactivity is dependent upon the establishment of strategies that structure the interactions between various agencies within the system.

While I do think it necessary to promote this as a virtue within interactive emergent processes, I do not feel capable of offering any blanket strategies for how this should look in practice. For example, different Electric Company projects featured different strategies for structuring emergent dynamics. At times it seemed hierarchical, that collaborative agencies were free to exist within a singular, centralizing creative vision, a vision that was responsible for responding to the results of the emergent processes but bound to streamline them into a coherent picture. Other projects seemed to arrive at coherence through an 'accordion-style' structuring, where the process would open and close with some regularity. Open moments would feature individual artists creating a piece that was responsive to a larger strategy for the whole, but free to find its

³³¹ I do not know whether such a recommendation is valid in the case of Giorgio's work as I am still unsure what its 'goals' were. In the case of the Electric Company project, a powerful aesthetic experience was desired despite (or because of) the innovative approaches being pursued. In other words, interactivity was a substantive interest, not just a normative or instrumental one (to use Fiorino's classification). In the case of Giorgio's 'post-aesthetic' phase I didn't find any substantive engagement with the work itself, it is purely normative.

own voice within this structure. Closed moments, what Collier referred to as ‘table work’, feature the team sitting around the table hashing out the relationship of the parts to the whole, vetting for structural coherence, thematic coherence, continuity of character, etc. In all cases, however, what the structuring strategy was for each different project seemed to be something the Company arrived at through a dialogue, a collective discussion identifying the goals for each work.

Is this instinct little more than backsliding: an attempt to sneak teleological ambitions back into the creative process? Does it dismiss processes that are trying to find an even deeper relationship with emergence? Processes that measure the value of their arrival point purely on the basis of the process used to get there? Is it only my own Modernist baggage that deems such approaches failures? Maybe, but my concerns remain well attended by the same group of senior academics who have arrived at similar conclusions. Robinson, in a very large, multi-year interactive, interdisciplinary research project developing sustainability engagement in the greater metropolitan area that includes Vancouver, British Columbia found the lack of “strong and adequately supported project management” to be one of the critical weaknesses for project whose ideals were deeply committed to interactive engagement.³³²

Similarly, Wynne and his colleagues at the European Commission looking at the future of innovation make a parallel argument:

Distributed innovation includes diversity, not just of actors, but also of new options that are opened up for exploration. That is one recurrent element of innovation policies, whether focused on technological promises or on collective experimentation. It should be combined, however, with selection and preparing for exploitation of some of the new options. When and how to go about reducing flexibility is a difficult question.³³³

Here, ‘selection’ and ‘preparing for exploitation’ are the structuring, or limiting decisions on the open distribution of agency within processes of innovation. Their argument grows unequivocal: “The ideology of a commons, as visible in open source (software) movements, can then turn into a tragedy of the commons. Thus, the commons must be structured, there must be specific arrangement.”³³⁴

Just as the Electric Company learned that any expansion of creative agencies within a process requires a corresponding expansion of structuring agency, this lesson seems to carry across disciplines rather directly.

³³² Robinson et al. “Sustainability as a Problem of Design.” *IAJ*. Volume 6, Issue 4. 2006. 185.

³³³ Felt, Wynne, Callon, et al. 2007. 28.

³³⁴ Felt, Wynne, Callon, et al. 2007. 28.

Strikingly, the concerns Kevin Kerr raised about issues of intellectual property as a problem within collaborative creation processes along with the condition of trust as the constant within functional contexts of distributed agency, are echoed precisely in Wynne et al's discussion: "The question therefore becomes which structures are more productive than others. Existent and new rules and practices of intellectual property rights are but one element. Trust is another element."³³⁵

8.3.3 Experts in the non-modern world

I hope this overlap between the broad domains of art, technoscience, and public engagement offer some confirmation as to the relevance of the arts to thinking through the challenge of exiting Modernism more generally, that they do reveal ways we might tune our attention to the coming challenges of our non-modern existences. While gleaned from a series of artistic projects, some form of this four-step approach might be useful to broader fields. Lurking in the background of this discussion however is the pressing issue of expertise in the non-modern world. Namely, what is an expert and what ought he or she do amidst the immanent emergence of the non-modern world?

The basic content of this concern is probably obvious. Within a metaphysics of immanence, truth requires active animation for it to hold, situating our realities much more *within* the borders between fact and value than in the territories they supposedly divide. Here, questions of meaning and knowledge, truth and value, conflate. This is a truism of late Modernity. What remains enticing is how the priority, authority, and responsibility of experts shift as their isolated objectivities betray them. For example, in the world of post-normal science 'extended peer communities' emerge as a way of "integrating the contextually informed insights of lay stakeholders with those of technical stakeholders" to develop what are referred to as 'extended facts.'³³⁶ As discussed elsewhere, the impetus towards a deeper integration between expert and lay perspectives is typically broken down into three categories, normative, instrumental, and substantive, as first proposed by Daniel Fiorino (1989).³³⁷

As part of the effort to step away from Modernist, absolutist strategies for knowledge production and public engagement, this schema seems to have been taken up fairly widely.³³⁸ In a European Commission report on public perceptions of science and technology developed by a writing team featuring some of the most prominent scholars in the field, we find a similar three-part justification:

³³⁵ Felt, Wynne, Callon, et al. 2007. 29.

³³⁶ Stephen Healy. "Post-normal science in postnormal times". *Futures*. March, 2011. Volume 43, Issue 2. 202.

³³⁷ Fiorino, D. 1989. Environmental risk and democratic process: A critical review. *Columbia Journal of Environmental Law* 14:501-47.

³³⁸ Andrew Stirling. "Opening up" and "Closing down": Power, Participation, and Pluralism in the Social Appraisal of Technology". *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Mar., 2008), 268-269.

The interpretations of this ... proliferation of participatory activities remain rather uneven. For some, it is simply a process of inevitable participatory democratization expanding into closed technoscientific realms. For others it is a move to restore shaken trust in science, thus also scientific public authority, so as to foster the credibility of policy commitments to technoscientific innovations. For still others it is a unique way to change the very way of producing innovation and making policies, through new forms of mutual understanding and intersection of science and society.³³⁹

Despite a lack of explicit reference to Fiorino's paper or his terms, we find this same sequence. Normative, instrumental, and substantive motivations are laid out in order; that it is the right thing to do, that it makes dissemination and implementation easier, and that it leads to better results.

As useful as this triptych may be, I worry it may prove something of a Trojan horse within the struggle to divest ourselves of our Modernist instincts. Further, I wonder if it may even obfuscate important aspects of the expert-lay relationship as it matures within fields like 'Post-normal science'. My concern is in whether creating separate categories for ethical (normative), political (instrumental), and methodological/epistemic (substantive) justifications might preserve the very bifurcations whose collapse necessitated this kind of engagement in the first place. Was it not the inability to parse cultural dimensions from natural dimensions in an increasing array of challenges that brought us to this point?

Divvying things up along such lines may have its uses. For instance, it may be reasonable to ask whether normative or instrumental motivations would have been sufficient to destabilize Modernist approaches all on their own, or whether it required a substantive collapse as well. Did scientists need to encounter the unmanageable complexity of post-normal objects in order to 're-publicize' fundamental questions of knowledge? Certainly this is an interesting question from the perspective of intellectual history, one which Fiorino's divisions make inviting to contemplate. Yet once they do fail, however, how can we go on thinking in terms of the normative, political *or* substantive?

Is it not the very essence of the non-modern world to understand human agency as deeply constitutive of even the most expansive aspects of reality, the climate, for example? Isn't the epistemic crisis of sustainability that we create the entity about which we are trying to be accurate? So to presume such accuracy (i.e. substantive gains) as independent of normative and instrumental dimensions is to default into the standard Modernist dichotomy that holds human, 'cultural' agency as separate from 'natural' agency. Is this not one of

³³⁹ Felt, Wynne, Callon, et al. 2007. 56.

the central lessons of climate change? That if entangled human agency is not participating in the descriptive engagement with the so-called ‘natural object’ in question, the descriptive enterprise will flounder as key constitutive agencies dissent?

In a non-modern, post-normal context, the integration of expert and lay perspectives undoubtedly promises substantive gain, but to isolate the instrumental and normative dimensions as separate frontiers seems to jeopardize the full reach of this transition. I suggest that this separation of motivations is unhelpful, a potentially regressive way of framing the integration of expert and public. One that still pits culture in tension with nature, reviving the old bifurcation and allowing the problem to remain too much an epistemic issue (i.e. substantive gains). Stephan Healy seems to confirm this concern:

Although ‘extended peer communities’ help ensure that the solutions proposed are contextually informed, [post-normal science] reproduces the traditional logic which assumes that superior outcomes rest upon the quality of the ‘facts’ informing them. This ‘rational decision-making’ approach ... is predicated on securing an ‘optimal’ solution, perceived in ultimately determinate terms.³⁴⁰

That is to say such an approach preserves the view that accuracy and reliability remains primarily a methodological issue, rather than a political, social concern inextricably caught up with challenges of meaning and agency. Certainly the former is important, but it may ultimately prove to be less of what is at stake in a more encompassing transition to non-modern, post-normal contexts of operation.

Art may prove a useful juxtaposition to this point. This, I think, is because art has not been able to afford the same Modernist baggage as other practices, at least when it comes to the relationship between substantive value and public agency. Try as it did to imitate the sciences, artistic ambitions to secure aesthetic ‘truth’ (their own substantive value) independent of public agency, independent of anyone noticing or caring, were brought up short and swift (see chapter 5 for the example of musical modernism that illustrates this point). While certainly present, the segregation of the substantive, normative, and instrumental made even less sense in the arts than it did in the sciences.³⁴¹

³⁴⁰ Healy, 2011. 202.

³⁴¹ Although not for lack of trying. And such a framing would yield a very interesting analysis. Normative priorities could consider all sorts of issues relating to dynamics of inclusion/exclusion as it relates to art, art’s capacity to offer distinction and, therefore, value (a la Bourdieu but read through the lens of *The Rebel Sell*, discussed in ch. 6); the instrumental priorities would trace a lovely arc from vexed relationships to patrons (predominantly church and aristocracy in a Western context), to problems of censorship and identity (negro spirituals in the U.S., degenerate art in Nazi Germany, or ‘formalism’ in Stalin’s Soviet Union); and the substantive priorities would address attempts to secure aesthetic value in isolation from these other interests (something similar to the discussion of musical modernism in chapter 5).

As was probably evident from reading the empirical chapters, each commissioned artist positioned himself within their own creative project in very different ways when it came to this question of authorial agency. Both Don McKay and Derek Kaplan went in for a traditional undistributed authorship, as the sole human arbiter of value and meaning within their projects. Kevin Kerr opted for a very widely distributed authorship within a project that did not excuse itself from some form of developmental direction. In other words, there was still anxiety about the resultant process, was it good? Was it well-made? Did it convince? The most extreme position was taken by Giorgio Magnanensi and the music commission. Here, once very basic materials were put in place and a basic approach described to the musicians, authorship was completely distributed to the performers and participating audience members. This was matched with zero anxiety about the resultant product. Questions of aesthetic value were irrelevant. The value of the result was based exclusively on the virtue of the process.

The first two examples fail to stress the issue of expert-lay relations too much, as integration here was between author (McKay; Kaplan) their materials (stick, boots, chair; rock, light) and their technologies (language; software). One telling outcome relevant to this question of expertise was the ultimate silence of McKay's walking stick when the two fall out of action. Once at rest, the more-than-human element falls mute, emphasizing the ultimate anthropocentric view that is inevitable in human representations. It is the sensitivity of McKay's language that brings the stick alive, that makes it the 'hero', as he calls it, of the poem. But even the dexterity of this language, able to map the entity with great subtlety, proves inadequate in capturing the stick in and of itself, on its own, out of relationship with its 'owner'.

The third example, the Electric Company, as we discussed in chapter 4, features a level of frustrated expertise in the form of lead writer Kevin Kerr trying to work collaboratively with a widely distributed creative agency, as well as director David Hudgins trying to work as responsively as possible, despite being responsible for the overall coherence of the piece. In both cases, these dynamics proved frustrating relative to the overall goal of creating coherent, powerful, or convincing theatre. The possible solutions to this tension seem to lie in previous Electric Company lessons regarding the relationship between distributed agency and structuring strategies, as discussed above.

It is in the music commission that I find the expert-lay issue exposed in the most interesting way. As I tried to convey in chapter 5, the position taken by Giorgio within the creative process he set up is very much a response to an artistic tradition that had prioritized a transcendent authorial agency to the exclusion of *any* social indications of worth. Musical modernism remains infamous for its defiant posture towards the

audience, emblemized by the famous 1950s article “Who Cares if you Listen?”³⁴² The degree to which the audience was so thoroughly informed of its irrelevance to the substantive value of the work cannot be overstated. This is, in part, why Giorgio’s focus has rebelled so thoroughly, dismissing questions of aesthetic value outright, focusing instead on the kinds of relationships it fosters between immanent agencies involved (composer, players and audience). Thus in the work prepared for this commission, he sought to set up an immanent compositional process that would generate music through interactions between performers and audience. This marks a complete subversion of his own authorial agency, pursuing instead the creative agency of his audience.

Nonetheless, it remains an unavoidable feature of this project (and this issue of expert-lay relations specifically) that it sought this creative agency *through music*. Music was the more-than-human measure of meaning and agency in this project. That it might serve as such I doubt is controversial. Patterns of sounds in the form of harmonies, melodies, rhythms, timbre, dynamics, tempi, and formal features are where we, by some apparently inexplicable feature of being human, seem to find so much of our selves, our identities, our feelings, our nostalgia, our hope, belief, enthusiasm, conviction, determination, resignation, peace, etc. I know few people for whom music is not a vital source of agency over the tumult of our inner lives.

Translate this expectation into the basic gesture of a listening effort, and we have placed ourselves in the hands of a performer to convert this engagement into meaning. That is, it is a moment of *expertise* that translates effort and engagement into meaning, allowing this sense of agency to arise. Turning that into an active role, as in the case of *Teatro Dell’Udito CIRS*, where the audience had to not just listen but also move, only served to make the effort-meaning-agency relationship that much more explicit. As discussed at length elsewhere, the lack of necessary structures available to translate our active engagement into music, into any meaningful dialogue between our actions and the larger semantic context in which these actions were irrefutably placed, resulted in an ironic lack of agency. Instead of offering an experience of agency viz the materials of music, we were left experiencing its opposite relative to the chaos of sounds that we proved incapable of shaping into any moment of coherence from start to finish.

This experience, in tandem with the ‘post-normal’ critique of Fiorino’s segregations, suggests that expert and lay perspectives may be entering an increasingly entangled mutual indispensability. On one hand, the issue should be less concerned with how much epistemic privilege the expert can ‘give up’ and still arrive at reliable, worthwhile results, and more focused on how much meaning and agency the expert can *enlist* in order to *produce* reliable, worthwhile results. On the other hand, the translation of engagement and effort into meaning

³⁴² see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Who_Cares_if_You_Listen

and agency cannot happen on its own. Here, meaning and agency hinges crucially on the integration of expertise rather than its abdication.

When Latour argued, (back in the late 20th century) that a fact needs a field of meaning not just to matter, but to be a fact, I took this to mean that its fact-ness is irrelevant without people who know, care, and behave in accordance with its dictates. It fell from its factuality through a sort of public inertness. With no one to switch it on it is no fact at all. However, some twenty years deeper into the anthropocene, this statement needs recalibration in an important way. In contexts where more-than-human agencies (music, climates, pathogens) are inextricable from human agencies, a stronger view is required. Facts are not facts without human meaning and agency not because they are inert without them but because they are substantively different entities in the absence of the constitutive element that is *us*.

It is a corollary of sorts that I am attempting to uncover and position relative to this question of expert-lay interactions in the post-normal age. If we can no longer take the public out of knowing and still have knowledge, as countless empirical examples show, we can ill-afford to exclude expertise from engagement and still have meaning and agency (the very means by which the public ‘knows’ something into ‘truth’). In other words, meaning and agency are the experts’ only hope of being ‘right’ in the post-normal age but, as I am suggesting here, they in turn depend crucially on experts’ capacity to connect necessary epistemic capacities to public values, languages, imaginings, and their efforts to engage.

By this account the challenge of expertise is not a challenge to step aside, but to step *inside*. There is no call to abandon post, nor any other cull of the intellectuals in the non-modern world. The abdication of Giorgio, himself a brilliant, internationally-renowned composer, from his own music may not be simply unnecessary, but even unhelpful to the larger purpose of a substantive gain that inextricably embeds normative and instrumental dimensions. An un-bifurcated, non-modern world requires a deep integration of expertise with public meaning and agency not in order to be fair, nor to be effective, but to meet a set of felicity conditions that can no longer separate these criteria from any substantive purchase on the issue in question. There are no ‘worlds without us’ in the post-normal age, and this point has received a lot of press of late. What I think deserves equal consideration is that there may be no worlds *for* us without the integration of sophisticated representations of the more-than-human agencies that populate our imaginations.³⁴³

³⁴³ John Robinson has explored a similar conviction through his various engagements with procedural sustainability, where public engagement has taken on a significant role in generating what sustainability means, necessitating a deep integration of lay and expert perspectives. See John Robinson, “Being undisciplined: Transgressions and Intersections in Academia and Beyond”, *Futures* (2008). 40 (1). 80-81.

8.3.4 The Innovation-Regurgitation Spectrum

Of the various vulnerabilities present in this largely conjectural analysis, one of the more exposed might be its optimism. What gets repeated frequently amidst the litany of post-normal conundrums (climate, economy, energy, etc.) is the urgent need for creativity. As Ziauddin Sardar concludes in his seminal paper “Welcome to Post-Normal Times”:

The most important ingredients for coping with postnormal times...are imagination and creativity. Why? Because we have no other way of dealing with complexity, contradictions and chaos. Imagination is the main tool, indeed I would suggest the only tool, which takes us from simple reasoned analysis to higher synthesis.³⁴⁴

This I take as a nod to the larger agenda of connecting the arts to sustainability in increasingly rigorous ways, something to be taken up in a moment. But before doing so, Sardar goes on to say, “if we cannot learn the lessons of history we need another source for the imagination to conceive of more sustainable and attainable futures.”³⁴⁵ This ‘other source’ is, for the most part, assumed to be the collective imaginings of an engaged public. In other words, immanence is the fuel of this necessary creativity.

But in trying to extricate ourselves of one deeply entrenched worldview and value structure in favour of something new and unfamiliar, it is necessary to ask how reliable this expectation is or might be? For example, in the opening interview with architect Derek Kaplan he expressed strong skepticism that collective processes were as creative as those marked by individual freedom and autonomy. Perhaps this would have been less surprising coming from Don McKay, Giorgio Magnangensi, or Kevin Kerr, that is, artists for whom creative practice is traditionally a solitary process. Architects, however, are accustomed to group dynamics; they almost always work as part of a large design teams. Thus Kaplan’s skepticism was speaking from significant experience.

Within the anticipated creative energy that will flow from more engaged, interactive, collaborative processes, where does this eager public come from? In discussing the many difficulties of integrating public values into European science and technology research, Wynne et al. caution the often optimistic view of the public and their appetite. “Nor should it be assumed that typical members of the public-at-large are out there ‘straining at the leash’ in their enthusiasm to perform as model ‘participatory citizen scientists.’”³⁴⁶ GCC researcher Jon

³⁴⁴ Sardar, 2010. 443.

³⁴⁵ Sardar, 2010. 444.

³⁴⁶ Felt, Wynne, Callon, et al. 2007. 41.

Salter had a similar experience while engaging staff from the City of Vancouver as part of the energy workshop channel. His participants seemed confused when he and fellow researcher Ellen Pond initiated an emergent design process intended to elicit salient issues from a city planning perspective. Instead the team was waiting for the researchers to ‘stand and deliver’, rather than elicit and respond.³⁴⁷

Finally, recall the IPCC example discussed at the outset of this research. Where, however reluctantly, integration between scientific inquiry and relevant value domains created a form of mandated science that was lambasted on grounds of shoddy methodology and pandering to political necessity. Whether skepticism from an artist experienced in collaborative dynamics, or a tentative view of ‘the public’ from researchers well versed in public engagement, or a sobering reminder of the response given to promising non-modern, post-normal practices, anticipating an immanent world as an ‘imaginary resource’ ready to fuel public creativity in response to interminably complex problems may be naïve. Any such transition is bound to be more difficult.

Alfonso Montuori suggests such pessimism is not unfounded:

As anxiety rises over the complexity, chaos, and contradictions of post-normal times, it is increasingly apparent that there is also a rise in polarizing, exclusive rhetoric, and an unwillingness to listen or dialogue. There is, rather, an increasingly bellicose, authoritarian response, which precludes any social creativity by imposing a simple order, often through scapegoating and polarization.³⁴⁸

Adding to this, I think there is a worthwhile study needing to happen that explores the way the liberation rhetoric fashioned in the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, and the ‘new social movements’ of the 60s and 70s, to engender pride in being black, or being a woman, or being gay, was appropriated by politicians in the early part of the 21st century to engender pride in being ignorant. George W. Bush, Sarah Palin, and Rob Ford are just a few examples of leaders who not only felt no compulsion to demonstrate the capacity to think beyond very ordinary limitations, but rather used their limitations as a virtue, a way of demonstrating to the electorate, ‘I am the *opposite* of an expert. I am *you*.’ Those of us who champion the virtues of the immanent world might take caution in Popeye’s famous dictum, ‘*I yam what I yam and that’s all that I yam*’.

Nonetheless theoretical enthusiasm surrounding the involvement of wider publics in deliberation and decision-making processes does find abundant examples of increased creativity and innovation through

³⁴⁷ Jon Salter, personal communication

³⁴⁸ Alfonso Montuori. “Beyond postnormal times: The future of creativity and the creativity of the future.” *Futures*. March, 2011. Volume 43, Issue 2. 225

distributed agency, examples from the worlds of technology, health, business, and, of course, as seen here in this research with the collaborative dynamics of the Electric Company Theatre. Rather than assuming that an increasingly immanent world is either inherently more or less creative, perhaps a spectrum is justified, running from the risk of regurgitation on one end to the promise innovation on the other.³⁴⁹

With this in mind, we can try and plot different contexts along its axis. This is no empty thought exercise. In the wake of rising public involvement in scientific pronouncements and procedures, the European Commission charged Wynne and colleagues to interrogate the relationship between European values and the challenges of science, technology, and innovation. In other words, where did Europe ‘fit’ on the spectrum proposed here, and, more importantly, where did they fit relative to economic competitors? Leadership was concerned about an increasing “diagnosis of an innovation-averse European public” amidst fears that this would “encourage potential global investment in knowledge to desert Europe for India, China, and Korea, with their supposedly less-averse publics.”³⁵⁰ But does this question deserves a rigorous empirical engagement aiming to take various ‘immanent contexts’—distributed agency, collaborative creation, emergent interactivity—and plot them somewhere along the regurgitation-innovation spectrum in order to conclude whether such a paradigm is indeed more or less creative than transcendent approaches? Several objections arise.

The weaker of these is to simply say going back is not an option. This transition was not a theoretical indulgence, but rather a practical urgency. It was a different kind of response to different kinds of problems prompted by different sorts of ‘objects’.

The systemic character of post-normal issues transcends the ability of traditional, technically focused decision-making to deal with them. Such issues not only break down conventional distinctions between the spheres of facts, values and politics, but also are systemically co-constituted through matters as diverse as: political economy...our technologies...our practices and behaviours, and our culture. Conventional decision-making tends to elide the complex ways in which numerous interdependent relationships between not only considerations such as these but also entities and categories that transcend them, such as comfort, act to make up our world.³⁵¹

This comment from Stephan Healy is echoed in similar sentiments from Wynne and his colleagues:

³⁴⁹ And it would be hasty to assume we only ever seek innovation from immanent dynamics, certainly levels of regurgitation would be desirable in key contexts, the capacity to preserve cultural traditions, for example.

³⁵⁰ Felt, Wynne, Callon, et al. 2007. 16.

³⁵¹ Healy, 2011. 206.

To continue to try to generate broad civic commitment by simply intensifying the science does not seem to work and a more constructive way out might be to admit that the ‘scientific’ object – sustainable development, ‘safe limits’ to human interference in the climate, or ‘risk’, for example – is itself ambiguous, and in need of continual collective work to negotiate and at least temporarily stabilize its collective meaning.³⁵²

This adds deeper conviction to the argument made following the initial discussion of the IPCC: The question is not whether to step back from processes seeking to integrate values and facts, publics and experts, but how to get better at them.

Stronger objections to trying to determine whether immanent dynamics ‘are creative or not’ stem from the argument that any such analysis would be deeply misleading. For one, a central outcome of this research that stems particularly from a detailed study of the Electric Company evolution and the work of Giorgio Magnanensi, is the belief that immanent emergent dynamics are not inherently one or the other, creative or conservative. The relevant question is not where on the regurgitation-innovation spectrum a given context, organization, collective, or individual lands but, once they do step into such practices, how might they move from one end to the other?

The ‘fourfold path’ proposed above (or some variation thereof) is a response to precisely this issue. Arguing that there are things we need to do and choices we need to make in order to structure an approach to collaborative, interactive dynamics, is to assume the conceptual framework merely provides the opportunity for novel interactions and outcomes, but does not forge them on its own. Recall the image of Kevin Kerr and David Hudgins, in one of their incarnating moments of the Electric Company Theatre flopping around on the floor “like a couple of fish”, waiting for the magic of interactive emergence to kick in.

Wynne and colleagues make a similar point, stressing the importance of turning the public into a dynamic element within the process.

A corollary is to work from the potential of citizens to be in-principle capable, independently knowledgeable agents, with their own frames of meaning in constructing rationalities, knowledges and responsibilities. Then we might begin to develop the cultural and political conditions under which

³⁵² Felt, Wynne, Callon, et al. 2007. 17.

genuine widespread civic ownership of societal problems like sustainability, and climate change (amongst others), and real engagement with the salient science, might be achieved.³⁵³

In other words, rather than simply engaging the public and seeing how they effect the process, it is essential to realize that equally relevant is how the process effects them. “Contrary to the defining commitments of western social science, this construct [the ‘public’] is forever in-the-making.”³⁵⁴

Thus, rather than it being necessary to decide whether Kaplan’s skepticism is accurate or whether the IPCC example should breed a sense of hopelessness or not, it is more a matter of establishing the opportunities, structures, invitations, cues, and prompts to *create* the publics we need and want to be. “The core message flowing from this report is that publics are never simply there, and just in need of being invited to participate, but are constructed and performed through the very process of involving them in one way of the other.”³⁵⁵ Within processes of public engagement, the capacity to move a ‘public’ along the spectrum from regurgitation to innovation hinges crucially on how we imagine and evoke them. Proposing a spectrum like this is a way of engaging those who are inclined to ask ‘*is immanence and collectivity more or less creative, yes or no?*’ It offers a bridge between those who are already so convinced of the merits and virtues of collective processes that this sort of questioning appears misplaced, and those who are looking to jump on any evidence to the contrary.

8.4 Art in the Anthropocene

8.4.1 Artistic ontologists and their transcendent indulgence?

This returns the investigation to its initiating instincts. Meeting the challenge of malleable publics is the very essence of artistic agency according to the artistic ontologist arguments cited earlier. To play it again one last time, art is a means of engaging ourselves in ways that provoke a quality of attention that summons possibilities of self, world, and other that are typically less conscribed by rigid definitions, projected certainties, contextual rationalities, etc. It offers what Don McKay has referred to as ‘poetic attention’, that capacity to attend to, and long after, that which we cannot contain within our definitions, our representations, our meanings. It is language demonstrating its inadequacy, imagery attending to what it does not capture, sound calling out the unnamed. Art is the capacity to encounter what lies beyond our ontologies. Once ontological categories fall short (perhaps especially at intuitive levels), reflexivity—an ‘openness to difference’—goes up.

³⁵³ Felt, Wynne, Callon, et al. 2007. 18.

³⁵⁴ Felt, Wynne, Callon, et al. 2007. 41.

³⁵⁵ Felt, Wynne, Callon, et al. 2007. 53.

Those whom I have tried to rally under the banner of ‘artistic ontologists’ all speak to this in some way, as I have touched on elsewhere. Heidegger’s sense of art as a push that enters history, that bit of ‘earth’ jutting into our ‘worlds’; Marcuse’s belief that art offers a new rationality; Elaine Scarry, Simone Weil, and Iris Murdoch all sharing a sense of art’s capacity to remove us from our entrenched familiarities and transform our sensibilities; and Dieleman’s ontological reflexivity, the means to “transcend boundaries and ... the limitations of scientific and technical rationality.”

All these definitions speak fairly explicitly about the capacity of artistic languages to help us transcend our immanent circumstances. How does all this talk of ‘beyond’ square with the rejection of transcendent signifiers and the turn towards the prerogative of an immanent world? How is this not something of a hypocritical bind? Am I not robbing the transcendent priority from the sciences to enable the arts an exclusive possession? Have I fallen into 19th century Romantic mysticism here? (Admittedly, part of me has never left). My only hope is to try and demonstrate that while all these ‘transcending moments’ seem to evoke and transgress an immanent world, that it is not in fact a transgression of the quality of immanence the Anthropocene requires. Instead, we go in search of Olivia’s “allowed fool”.³⁵⁶

8.4.2 Immanence in the Anthropocene

This is an argument, however, and not a proof, as I really cannot say what qualities of immanence the Anthropocene requires, as it is not an object with intrinsic qualities. A logical constraint of the Anthropocene is that its qualities will depend largely on how it is evoked over the coming decades. For now, the argument seeks only to alleviate any excessive hypocrisy, while clarifying my own assumptions about what kind of immanence, and, perhaps, what kind of transcendence, might make a more hospitable, even desirable destination out of an emerging Anthropocenic imagination.

This challenge can be met by trying to reconcile the theory of art put forward by George Steiner in *Real Presences* (1989), with the recent discussion of ‘Beings of Fiction’ offered by Latour in *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*. Steiner is, for me, perhaps the very embodiment of the artistic ontologist, with all its promise and vulnerability. The vulnerability I find in Steiner’s work is one I find in lower doses throughout those I am corraling as ‘artistic ontologists’ more generally, and certainly one I found in myself when beginning this research (and continue to chafe against). Throughout *Real Presences*, Steiner’s theory of art is drawn exclusively from the European canon. His musical admiration rarely crosses 1830, his visual art references use Kandinsky

³⁵⁶ *Twelfth Night*, Act 1, scene 5.

as their outlier, and I don't recall a writer later than Proust illustrating a literary reference. It is the Western canon in its most sifted form.

While Steiner is certainly aware of the great political-epistemic upheavals in academia and the arts post-1950 (the former is a long-standing opponent of his and primary target within the pages of this book), there is an almost brazen allegiance to a fairly narrow context of practice. While reading him I find his capacity to collate, abstract, and articulate deeper principles and implications of this world astounding, there are sentences worth reading a dozen times. My hesitancy, however, lies in questioning how much this discussion can inform beyond the limits of its reference (the Western canon). In other words, are we caught within an enchanting yet self-referencing loop, one whose principles will hold true providing our imaginations are the product of the same imaginative resources as the argument? Consider Latour's comment that works of art "*offer* us an imagination that we would not have had without them."³⁵⁷

I do not know whether art is more vulnerable to the kind of circular, self-referencing reasoning than other discourses, although I expect it is. I expect the strengths of its embodied resonances tempt us into feeling that, however polite and genuflectory we are being, we can't help but feel ourselves to be reasoning beyond the limits of mere cultural reference. Add a level of hegemony as that typically enjoyed by the West and the risk of over-reaching in our estimations towards an art-*humanity* relation seems high. Perhaps this brief aside stands as a continued hesitation as to the full implications of this research project more generally. Again, the only answer I think still holds in the face of this concern is that however Eurocentric this discussion may inevitably be, if its reach is similarly limited, that may be enough to remain valid to the larger concern of present planetary distress. The environmental crisis is an artifact of the same imaginative outlook.

8.4.3 The ontological status of Steiner's "presence"

In *Real Presences* Steiner takes on the daunting challenge of articulating what exactly we experience when we experience art. What is it that is happening when we are gripped by an aesthetic encounter?

"This essay argues a wager on transcendence. It argues that there is in the art act and its reception ... a presumption of presence."³⁵⁸ What is the nature of such a presence? Steiner's thesis begins with an idea described throughout this discussion, that "there is always, as Blake taught, "excess" of the signified beyond the signifier."³⁵⁹ This "surplus value", the gap between a thing's naming and its being is, for Steiner, the core

³⁵⁷ Latour, 2013. 240.

³⁵⁸ George Steiner. *Real Presences*. Faber and Faber. London. 1989. 213.

³⁵⁹ Steiner, 1989. 84.

concern of the artistic gesture: “I would define literature (art, music) as *the maximalization of semantic incommensurability*.”³⁶⁰

I think we are safe to align this with Heidegger’s notion of art as that which holds forth the earth. Both accounts focus on the capacity to transgress the world (i.e. semantic *commensurability*) in some articulate way. Beyond this assertion of art’s purpose, it is the status of such a gap, what it is made of, where it comes from, and how we are expected to relate to it, that is crucial to reconciling my instincts about art with my hopes for an immanent world. A sense of incommensurability between maps and territories, representations and things, might strike our rational instincts as an epistemic limitation endemic to the human perspective. In other words, the better we get at mapping, the less incommensurability. But for Steiner, the incommensurable is less contingent on the limits of our reach and more on “the informing pressure of a real presence” which the aesthetic gesture is able to respond to and express.³⁶¹

In most cultures, in the witness borne to poetry and art until most recent modernity, the source of ‘otherness’ has been actualized or metaphorized as transcendent. It has been evoked as divine, as magical, as daemonic....That presence is the source of powers, of significations in the text, in the work, neither consciously willed nor consciously understood.³⁶²

Whether divine, magic, or daemonic, Steiner is clearly evoking a palpable agency outside what might strike us as an immanent reality, typically conceived (as is probably evident I am hedging bets here). “Referral and self-referral to a transcendent dimension, to that which is felt to reside either explicitly—this is to say ritually, theologically, by force of revelation—or implicitly, outside immanent and purely secular reach, does underwrite created forms.”³⁶³ In fact, it is his assertion that any account of the artistic encounter that falls within the boundaries of an immanent explanation is “manifestly false to human experience.”³⁶⁴ We do not encounter art that way.

Consider the two works that featured interactive emergence with their audience, an invitation to involve our agency in ‘making up’ what we are experiencing, the music, and to a lesser extent, theatre commissions. What were we expecting? Nothing more than the sum of our own opinions? Are we attentive in a way that would allow us to say with satisfaction to any outcome, ‘a-ha, so *that’s* the sum of our wills, we did *that*, as it turns out’, as if our interest is contained in collecting the mean of an aggregate with no anticipation that there is to

³⁶⁰ Steiner, 1989. 83.

³⁶¹ Steiner, 1989. 215.

³⁶² Steiner, 1989. 211.

³⁶³ Steiner, 1989. 216.

³⁶⁴ Steiner, 1989. 212.

be reflected in our actions a *response* of some kind coming from beyond that? Can a satisfying result of an emergent process be nothing more than the average of its immanent opinion?

I am reminded of the classic ‘wisdom of crowds’ game, where a group guesses the number of beans, and all the guesses are added up, divided by the total, whereupon we discover that the mean of the aggregate is the closest to the actual number and there is a great satisfaction in discovering a relationship between truth, representation and group work. But what is the analogy here? That Giorgio’s work sent us home without having anyone who knew how to count (i.e. had musical skill) and so tell us how many beans were in the jar? Or, that the Electric Company allowed us to see everyone guessing, but never actually used those guesses to reflect on the beans, and just told us the amount anyway? Clearly this game is no fun unless we hear how many beans we think are in the jar *and* how many beans the beans think are in the jar. It is the interaction of these *immanent* elements that exposes the relationships between beans and jars and guessers.

But this is a game, not art. It gets to ask easy questions safe within the rationalized world of numbers and quantities, all of which can remain idiomatic to an immanent world without giving up much. It does not have to face the more difficult problems of what a bean *is* or what it *means*, or what we are and what it means that we are there, guessing at beans in the hopes of understanding ourselves better. It is variations on these sorts of questions that are proving increasingly intractable within the challenges of sustainability. It is in this domain that Steiner posits his transcendence, that the answers that convince at this level of human longing do not do so without us *feeling* that we have glimpsed something beyond immanent circumstance. “If the terms of the argument are solely those of immanence, the free, real presence of meaning within form cannot be adequately defined or given metaphysical plausibility.”³⁶⁵

At the root of this, for Steiner (and for most of what I call artistic ontology), is the capacity to make strange, not just our experience of an external world, but our internal selves as well.

Serious painting, music, literature or sculpture make palpable to us, as do no other means of communication, the unassuaged, unhoused instability and estrangement of our condition. We are, at key instants, strangers to ourselves, errant at the gates of our own psyche. We knock blindly at the doors of turbulence, of creativity, of inhibition within the *terra incognita* of our own selves.³⁶⁶

The phenomenology of Steiner’s transcendence is nothing more than *foreignness*, a failure of categories, incommensurability between what we have capacity to know and what we have capacity to experience.

³⁶⁵ Steiner, 1989. 199.

³⁶⁶ Steiner, 1989. 139.

Again, my concern is how much this account runs contrary to the precepts of the non-modern world. How can a world intent on building itself from the ground up continue to huddle beneath an ‘informing pressure’ that has no more specificity than the “presence of an absence”? I am reminded of Latour’s lament from *Politics of Nature*: “over all the arrangements floats the shadow of a transcendence that would escape all compromise.”³⁶⁷ The stakes are high. If the artistic-ontologist argument amounts to a transcendent signifier, then the present exercise trying to isolate and defend this account of artistic agency as useful to the non-modern world surely collapses.

8.4.4 Unlikely compatriots

Yet recall Latour’s recent discussion of instauration as an emblem of what it is to live in a constructed world. Latour, the very champion of the non-modern, was attempting to rehabilitate a sense of the constructed as separate from post-modern notions of reality as the result of arbitrary human agencies at work. For Latour, efforts to revise our relationship with the planet appeared stuck either in a world made of raw materials and mechanical laws, or in a world made of nothing more than the exclusive agency of human volition. Instauration is a straddling concept, evoked to identify middle ground. What’s more, it is an image borrowed from Souriau’s work on aesthetics, a term used to try and capture the art-making process that is now being used to describe a reality-making process that accommodates both the agency of the material world and the agency of the human world.

Equipped with this sense of construction and instauration, Latour sounds much like Steiner: “Without any doubt, there is some *exteriority* among the beings of fiction: they impose themselves on those responsible for their instauration, for the latter are more like constituents than “creators” (Latour).³⁶⁸ As we saw above, the gesture of instauration, of construction more generally, is very much one of response to an informing pressure, an agency beyond creative volition. Furthermore, it is a response to an agency whose ontological status seems as vague as Steiner’s ‘presence of an absence, open, and yet ‘capable of making you do something.’

The difference between the apparently transcendent entities involved in both Latour’s instauration and Steiner’s informing pressure, and the problematic transcendence that represents the trouble with Modernism more generally, hinges crucially on its ontological, and therefore political status. What is it, and what can we propose to do with it? The shadow of transcendence that would escape all compromise was, for Latour “the

³⁶⁷ Latour, 2004. 175.

³⁶⁸ Latour, 2013. 240.

politicization of the sciences through epistemology in order to render ordinary political life impotent through the threat of an incontestable nature.”³⁶⁹ Transcendent natural laws shut down the role of human value, perspective, experience, etc.³⁷⁰

The transcendence available to us through art offers balance to this unfortunate turn of events by availing no mastery of what lies beyond the immanent. Any sense of being a ‘master creator’ does not imply mastery over this agency, and certainly even the most accomplished artists I know suffer the anxiety of the creative process as much or more than they did in younger, perhaps more audacious times. Secondly, such transcendence cannot exist without the animating presence of the human perspective. Therefore, as with Latour, Steiner finds in this relationship to creativity a middle ground between the excesses of both Modernism and post-modernism:

Between this illusory absolute, this finality which would, in fact, negate the vital essence of freedom, and the gratuitous play, itself despotic by its very arbitrariness, of interpretive non-sense, lies the rich, legitimate ground of the philological.³⁷¹

Any ‘absolute’ sense we might try to forge from the aesthetic’s transcendence, is, as Steiner points out, not only illusory, but eliminates what is essential to the aesthetic encounter, freedom. It is this freedom that is so problematic for the instrumental applications of art, for those who need art to import didactic messages. Without what Steiner calls ‘the impenetrable freedom’ of the poetic gesture “the promise of authorized, finally revealed meaning may be [a] Siren song”.³⁷²

Leaping from our vessel at the promise of final meaning, whether in art or science, is the self-destructive instinct we are trying to revise. Historically, art has worn its final meanings much less convincingly than science, and so perhaps might serve to model their awkwardness more generally? In other words, can art help put the absolute out of style without slipping into excesses of post-modern nihilism? Where, to continue quoting Steiner on art, “a good reading falls short of the text or art object by a distance, by a perimeter of inadequacy”³⁷³ and “understanding is patiently won, and at all times, provisional”.³⁷⁴ However transcendent an encounter might be, art, even for George Steiner goes no further than that which “allows us to inhabit the tentative”.³⁷⁵

³⁶⁹ Latour, 2004. 10.

³⁷⁰ This being the supreme irony of Modernism that made the human at once all-powerful through the supposed mastery and command of the natural world, and yet, existentially insignificant, marginalized, and impotent. See Tarnas 2006

³⁷¹ Steiner, 1989. 165.

³⁷² Steiner, 1989.175.

³⁷³ Steiner, 1989. 175.

³⁷⁴ Steiner, 1989. 176.

³⁷⁵ Steiner, 1989. 175.

8.4.5 As good as science or as problematic as art?

This serves to orient myself towards one of the initial observations laid out at the beginning of this study. As mentioned, I began this exploration both enthused and apprehensive at the increasing interest in artistic agency from within non-aesthetic fields. What seems clearer now is that it was not simply an apprehension about how art was being used (although this was central and hopefully sufficiently addressed by now), but also a buried suspicion that such use might offer our thinking the opportunity *not* to change.

That is to say, including the arts within one's larger epistemic hegemony might be akin to including other races within one's cultural hegemony. One never really gives up any meaningful ground. The more difficult orientation towards art as a way of knowing our worlds is, likely enough, the more necessary. Rather than trying to convince ourselves that art is 'just as good as science' as a way of knowing the world, the deeper response is to consider that science is just as *problematic* as art as a way of knowing the world. Replete with all the inadequacies, shortcomings, vagaries, and provisional qualities we've come to expect from a bit of verse. Art might teach us the fraught nature of final meanings more naturally than critiques of science. We needn't divest ourselves of any founding convictions within the artistic context. Rather it would seem that we are, in art, most at home with our nascent non-modern selves. Re-contextualizing the artistic encounter as such may orient us to the purpose with greater clarity.

8.4.6 The yet still distant horizon

Richard Rorty deserves a final word in this discussion, as I understand more clearly now why he chose the label 'literary' to describe an age relieved of redemptive truth. This recent exploration of art suggests it not only offers a kind of undeniable pluralism that would make the totalizing absolutism of transcendent metaphysics untenable (although he does wager heavily on this³⁷⁶). This more corrosive effect of art, its capacity to undermine epistemology more generally, furthers Rorty's ambition to realize "a context in which edification rather than knowledge is the 'goal of thinking.'"³⁷⁷ For Rorty, we move closer to the non-modern—the literary age—through a more commonly realized "need to get beyond representationalism, and thus into an intellectual world in which human beings are responsible only to each other."³⁷⁸

³⁷⁶ Rorty, 2007. 7, 11, 13.

³⁷⁷ Richard Rorty. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton University Press. 1981. 359.

³⁷⁸ Rorty, 2007. 4.

Both Latour and Steiner are clearly on similar paths, all leading to some form of an immanent world. And yet they both seem to stop short of where Rorty ultimately wants to take us: “What matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right.”³⁷⁹ The sentiment here that I feel needs a touch of redress—which I find in both Steiner and Latour—is this notion of us “clinging together against the dark.” Though Rorty disowned the label “post-modern”³⁸⁰, this sentiment certainly bears the nihilism I suggest the non-modern would do well to renounce, or at least greatly modify. When Rorty says “the *only* source of redemption is the human imagination” (my italics) it is with enthusiasm.³⁸¹ But I am not convinced we want to feel that alone in the world, nor that we need to. So much of how I have tried to shape the aesthetic orientation has been towards responsiveness, towards an engaging with agencies beyond its powers of fabrication.

This is clearly the agenda found in the theoretical illustrations of both Steiner and Latour, and it bears out in the practical approaches displayed in the work of McKay, Kaplan, and Kerr. In it I find a more palatable invitation to the non-modern, post-normal, literary age. Here I find a preservation of the endless pursuit of wisdom, a continuity with the timeless act of gazing into skies to wonder at worlds below. The stars of instauration are worth leaving in the heavens, if not to light Rorty’s “dark”, then to remind us of a continuous impulse to reach beyond circumstance. Without it I fear the coming age of non-modernity would bring us into some digitally-enabled hyper-democracy, a society increasingly sophisticated at asking questions to itself, yet ever less able to ask questions *about* itself.

This, I hope, marks a faithful tracking of ‘artistic ontology’ into the non-modern world. Theoretically it may serve as another layer to the mounting critique of Modernity’s absolutism. More practically it may represent a nascent idiom within which to experience ourselves and our worlds without such accounts, a comfort in the absence of final meanings. At the same time, an almost mystical attentiveness of instauration spares us the nihilism given to some branches of the post-modern without necessarily delivering us into a full-blown neo-Romanticism.³⁸² I am aware that it may seem to some like I am trying to take my blankie to school, that a more courageous voyager into the Anthropocene would not fret at losing such familiarities. For me it remains a conviction about the human character, that the more we institutionalize our instinct to think beyond the boundaries of our present worlds, the more we move towards an innovative, creative realization of our immanent worlds. Art strikes me as a way to maintain this instinct without compromising the interests of the non-modern world in the way that a nostalgic view of science or religion might.

³⁷⁹ Richard Rorty. *Consequences of Pragmatism*. University of Minnesota. 1982. 166.

³⁸⁰ James Tartaglia. *Rorty and the Mirror of Nature*. Routledge, 2007. 15.

³⁸¹ Rorty, 2007. 13.

³⁸² Although admittedly, the increasing momentum of ‘new age’ consciousness in its variety of forms is *precisely* this.

From a more empirical perspective, this theoretical extrapolation of the non-modern world intersects with the commissions at four interconnected points: consensus-building with human and more-than-human agencies; regulating the tension between expertise and emergence; structuring and managing emergent dynamics; and negotiating the spectrum of public appetite and indulgence (regurgitation-innovation). At a more practical level then, the non-modern world appears as one where public meaning and agency have fallen increasingly into lock step with accuracy and reliability. In response, the challenge of expertise may be one of addressing both sides of this dynamic, or perhaps more precisely, managing its circular flow. The capacity to illuminate the more-than-human is central to the challenge of building relevant human meanings, which, as a central tenet of the non-modern world, feeds back into the status of the more-than-human entities in question now more than ever (music, climates, or scallops). Responsive organisms, technological gremlins, and their recalcitrant but pliable publics are the fauna of this strange land.

8.5 Sustainability in the Anthropocene

How does this reintegrate with the problems of sustainability? If the challenge remains epistemological, representational (in a Rortian sense), a continued challenge to prove the world real, then it doesn't. In such a case, neither the recalcitrance nor pliability of any public is of much relevance, nor can go on being surprised by dynamic organisms and the unanticipated agencies of technological systems. The present view, however, is an attempt to avoid the pitfalls and gridlock of standard approaches by engaging the challenge of sustainability as less one of proving the world real in its hard and fast facts, and more of exploring sustainability within a conviction that the world is fundamentally an imaginary place.

8.5.1 How real is the imaginary world?

That the world is imaginary strikes me as so intuitively obvious it seems vanish for its self-evidence. Yet at the same time, I am always surprised at how little leverage the idea seems to have over my encounter with reality. Of course the world takes shape in accordance with my imaginative capacities. How else could I experience anything but through the classifications, descriptions, arrangements, names, and narrations of my imaginative resources? Take climate change for example. As climatologist Mike Hulme points out, it was an imaginative shift that turned 'the sky' into 'the atmosphere'. It was an imaginative capacity that allowed us to measure fluctuations in atmospheric composition, enabling us to participate in a narrative of climate *change*.³⁸³ This does not mean that the gods, the sky, the atmosphere, and/or the climate were not participants in these layered imaginings—as in the style of instauration discussed above— assenting and dissenting, provoking,

³⁸³ Mike Hulme. *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction, and Opportunity*. Cambridge University Press. 2009. 6-7

challenging, agreeing, contradicting, etc., but that any account of their being is contingent on the imaginative categories that invoke them.

The move we Modernists seem to make to hide our implicated subjectivity, our imaginative agency, and thus keep the 'real world' close, is to impose a 'real/pretend' or 'true/false' dichotomy on the 'present/past' relationship. The present is real and true, the past, pretend and false. But why does this not immediately condemn the present to similar futility in anticipation of an increasingly real tomorrow? How can today be simultaneously true in relation to its past, and false in relation to the future? It seems as if Modernism gets around this logical bind by extending a kind of neo-con 'end of history' outlook to include epistemology. We slip the Gordian knot by convincing ourselves what we are just now encountering the world as it *really* exists. In other words, the 'real/pretend' dichotomy applies to present/past but no longer to future/present because reality is known comprehensively only just now. Aside from differing trends in hats and footwear it will remain unchanged from this point on. Citizens of past circumstance were either fools, living in their pretend/false worlds, or polite enough to carry out a hedged existence awaiting proper accounts of insemination, fermentation, quantitative easing, and dying.

The citizens of Mesopotamia lived on a round Earth no more than we live in accordance with the yet-to-be-discovered facts of next week. If we are the future to our history, how can we avoid being the history to our future? As Latour points out, not only is the Modern world no less imaginary than worlds gone-by, it has never been more so. Again, a condition that seems to slip past experience no matter how looming and obvious it seems.

What is astonishing is that the Moderns all live surrounded by constructions, within the most artificial worlds ever developed. Saturated with images, they are savvy consumers of tons of manufactured products, avid spectators of cultural productions invented from A to Z; they live in huge cities all of whose details have been put in place one by one, and often recently; they are dazzled with admiration for works of imagination. And yet their idea of creation, construction, production, is so strangely bifurcated that they end up claiming they have to *choose* between the real and the artificial. Anyone who thinks at all like an anthropologist can only remain dumbstruck before this lack of self-knowledge: how have they managed to last until now while being so badly mistaken about their own virtues?³⁸⁴

This question has no more pointed context than sustainability.

³⁸⁴ Latour, 2013. 160.

The failure of approaches to sustainability that insist on trying to prove the world real surely lies in the degree to which they participate in this contextual blindness. Until we acknowledge that the world is imaginary in the sense that human subjectivities are invariably constitutive of any given ‘reality’, we will persist in undermining the quality of conversation and the quality of attention that would include one of the fundamental constitutive agencies of the Anthropocene. In other words, how to incorporate the material agency of the human imagination?

Therefore the challenge of sustainability in an imaginary world is much of what we have seen already. It is the act of instauration, Latour’s three-phase ‘construction’ that explicitly blends the agencies of subject and object in any encounter that *constitutes* the reality of a given entity. It is the challenge faced by expertise to build meaning and agency alongside descriptive accounts, stabilizing the animating agencies necessary to enact reliable engagement with sustainability’s ‘post-normal objects’, what were referred to earlier as ‘extended facts’, facts that feature deep, sophisticated levels of expertise situated within a larger explicit value context. Sustainability in an imaginary world invests in its answers only insofar as they promote better and better questions. The maps of the imaginary world can only ever be drawn in pencil.

8.5.2 Flipping the sustainability predicate: Mike Hulme and the climate change debate

A useful rule of thumb in trying to move from sustainability in the real world to sustainability in the imaginary world might be that, generally speaking, the arrow is probably pointing the wrong way. Recall the discussion of procedural sustainability near the outset of this study. As the underlying condition of the Greenest City Conversations, procedural sustainability sought to elicit solutions to sustainability *from* a given context, rather than *for* a given context. Truth was not something we delivered, but something we sought through an emergent interaction with its relevant public.

The challenge I felt this posed to our thinking and understanding of the world more broadly was something the art channel set to explore. The music commission sought to elicit music from the audience; the poetry explored ways of pulling the text from its objects (boots, stick, chair); the theatre commission sought to find its play in the interaction of myriad working parts—site, writers, designers, actors, audience; and the architecture piece explored the extraction of a design from the agencies of stone and light. These are all offshoots of the same basic reversal. The challenge of moving into the Anthropocene as gracefully as possible lies in our comfort with such a change in directions. Understanding how to structure our engagements, revise our roles, and walk backwards through our processes until we no longer notice we’re going in a direction opposite to the familiar.

If such a reversal seems unwarranted or hasty, or the indulgence of academic theorizing, consider the work of Mike Hulme. In his 2009 publication *Why We Disagree About Climate Change* this climate scientist, integral member of the IPCC, and director of major climate change organizations in the U.K. concludes simply that humans should not try and solve climate change. Nothing good will come of continuing to conceive of this issue as “a megaproblem awaiting a megasolution.”³⁸⁵

To understand such a conclusion from someone who was dedicated much of his life to solving climate change, it might serve to track the progress of his argument. He begins along similar lines as those traced above. The climate is, to a significant degree, imaginary, something that “exists as much in the human mind and in the matrices of cultural practices as it exists as an independent and objective physical category.”³⁸⁶ Science, as the method that supposedly remediates such a circumstance, is equally situated: “Where science is practiced, by whom and in what era, affects the knowledge that science produces. Science not only has a methodology, but it also has a history, a geography, and a sociology.”³⁸⁷ Climate change is itself a textbook post-normal problem governed by a fundamental condition of uncertainty thanks to several compounding features: An “incomplete understanding of how the physical climate system works”; An “innate unpredictability of large, complex and chaotic systems such as the global atmosphere and ocean”; And, pertinent to our post-normal interests, “a consequence of humans being part of the future being predicted. Individual and collective human choices five, twenty, or fifty years into the future are not predictable in any scientific sense.”³⁸⁸ This point has been put succinctly by John Robinson: “The future is not pre-determined but is to a significant degree a function of choice and behaviour; uncertainty defined in probabilistic terms is not a good way to conceptualize the future variance of systems characterized by volition and intentionality.”³⁸⁹

Thus, as we have seen throughout this discussion, climate and climate change cannot be engaged as objects of scientific inquiry in any traditional sense. “The separation of knowledge about climate change from the politics of climate change—a process that has been described as ‘purification’—is no longer possible, even if it ever was.”³⁹⁰ Thus the problem is intractable to standard approaches, many of which we might think of as complicit with trying to prove the world ‘real’. “The problem with all these different, and sometimes contradictory, elements of the global solution-structure is that they underestimate the ‘wickedness’ of climate

³⁸⁵ Hulme, 2009. 333.

³⁸⁶ Hulme, 2009. 28.

³⁸⁷ Hulme, 2009. 78.

³⁸⁸ Hulme, 2009. 83.

³⁸⁹ Robinson, personal communication.

³⁹⁰ Hulme, 2009. 107.

change and overestimate the abilities of economics, politics or technologies to tame and master our changing climate.”³⁹¹

For Hulme, redoubling our efforts misses the point. Deciding that climate change is a harder problem to solve than we thought and therefore digging in to push even harder in the same direction would be a mistake.

If we pursue the route of seeking ever larger and grander solutions to climate change we will continue to end up frustrated and disillusioned: global deals will be stymied, science and economics will remain battlegrounds for rearguard actions, global emissions will continue to rise, vulnerabilities to climate risks will remain. And we will end up unleashing ever more reactionary and dangerous interventions in our despairing search for a solution to our wicked problem: the colonization of agricultural land with energy crops, the colonization of space with mirrors, the colonization of the human spirit with authoritarian government.³⁹²

Rather, it is a different problem than we thought, one whose object may surprise us. “The physical transformation of our climate now under way shows both the extent of our inadvertent and unwanted agency, but also the limits of our science-saturated and spiritually-impoverished wisdom.”³⁹³ That is to say, it is ourselves, and not the climate, that we must come to understand more deeply and engage with as the dependent variable in the experience of climate change.

I suggest it is handy to think of this approach as ‘flipping the predicate’ of climate change. Instead of the standard ‘humans solve climate change’ agenda, Hulme advocates a ‘climate change solves humans’ approach.

We need to reveal the creative psychological, ethical, and spiritual work that climate change is doing for us. Understanding the ways in which climate change connects with foundational human instincts opens up possibilities for re-situating culture and the human spirit at the heart of our understanding of our changing climate. Rather than catalyzing disagreements about how, when and where to tackle climate change, the idea of climate change should be seen as an intellectual resource around which our collective and personal identities and projects can form and take shape. We need not ask what we can do for climate change, but to ask what climate change can do for us.³⁹⁴

³⁹¹ Hulme, 2009. 335.

³⁹² Hulme, 2009. 359.

³⁹³ Hulme, 2009. 361.

³⁹⁴ Hulme, 2009. 326.

This ‘flipping the predicate’ may be useful for procedural approaches to sustainability more generally, shorthand for sustainability in an imaginary world.

Hulme’s perspective on the climate is weathered and robust, with a long publishing record across social and natural science journals in its support.³⁹⁵ *Why We Disagree About Climate Change* tracks congestion on climate action through its legal, political, scientific, spiritual, and cultural dimensions. Thus his turn away from the climate as the object to be solved within the crisis of climate change and towards the human does not come across as hasty or naïve. The sense of climate change as an opportunity, an “imaginative condition of human existence” that “does deeper cultural work” than simply rallying our best scientific and political efforts, tells a different story of sustainability more generally.

Solving climate change should not be the focus of our efforts any more than we should be ‘solving’ the idea of human rights or liberal democracy. It really is not about stopping climate chaos. Instead, we need to see how we can use the idea of climate change—the matrix of ecological functions, power relationships, cultural discourses and material flows that climate change reveals—to rethink how we take forward our political, social, economic, and personal projects over the decades to come.³⁹⁶

Thus the impact of climate change needs be felt less in terms of sea level rise and more at the level of an existential opportunity. A reorientation and recalibration of what it means to be a person on this planet.

8.6 Regenerative Sustainability: John Robinson and the insufficiency of ‘doing less bad’

This idea of ‘flipping the sustainability predicate’ as inspired by Hulme’s arguments about climate change needing to move from the standard imperative “human fix planet” to the more intriguing “planet fix human”, veers towards an emerging approach to sustainability from John Robinson and his work on the Vancouver campus of the University of British Columbia. Robinson acknowledges sustainability’s roots in environmental science and its historical allegiance to a ‘limits’ argument focused on harm reduction, getting negative human impacts on planetary systems to net-zero. As he points out, the cultural narrative that emerges here is that human activities are bad for the planet and so the path to sustainability involves minimizing them. However implicit, it is a tenacious message. The *less* human activity, the better.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁵ For a record of publications see:

<http://www.researcherid.com/ProfileView.action?returnCode=ROUTER.Unauthorized&queryString=KG0UuZjN5WlnUgQXxhsj4bK%252BRHg7HMmdTqJl30b8P4s%253D&SrcApp=CR&Init=Yes>

³⁹⁶ Hulme, 2009. 362.

³⁹⁷ Robinson’s work on regenerative sustainability has yet to be published, all citations of his thinking on the topic refer to personal communications.

As we have seen throughout this discussion, however, the larger descriptive enterprise underlying the limits argument is breaking down. Social, political, and technological elements frustrate a measurement and prediction enterprise already straining under the complexity and scale of their objects of concern (e.g. climates, oceans, energy, etc.). According to scholars like Hulme, Robinson, Wynne and colleagues, along with the post-normal movement, integrating human values, meanings and agency is essential to offering meaningful descriptions of planetary elements. Hence Robinson's advocacy of 'procedural sustainability'. Sustainability can no longer be thought of as something arrived in the private languages of expertise, but must emerge in situ, as the result of a larger engagement with the relevant agencies (inanimate, non-human, and human). In such contexts, expertise is invaluable for creating fluid and substantial representations of each, with no trump card in the deck.

While procedural sustainability may have eliminated the transcendent objectivities of expertise within emergent processes, the larger narrative of limits, harm reduction, and unwanted human agency remains a background condition to sustainability engagement, despite its foundational premises faltering within an increasing number of post-normal contexts. To this, Robinson proposes a notion of 'regenerative sustainability'. An approach to sustainability that sees human activity, in principle, not as something to minimize, but rather as something to direct in positive ways, ways that improve human and environmental well-being. Regenerative sustainability shifts the old narrative from 'doing less bad' to 'doing more good', from its goal of reducing damage to one of creating benefits, and from pursuing net zero impacts to impacts that are net positive on the surrounding context. Regenerative sustainability reorients existential dimensions of sustainability from sacrifice, restraint, and trying to 'get out of the way', to one of contribution and necessity.³⁹⁸

His arguments are fourfold. As we have just seen, the foundational premises of the limits argument have been breaking down in the complexity and post-normalcy of an increasing number of sustainability contexts. Pursuing sustainability though trying to prove the world real is a declining venture. Secondly, as the post-normal context of an increasing number of sustainability concerns identifies, these problems are not exclusively environmental but necessarily implicate the constitutive agencies of social, political, and technological dimensions. Third, according to Robinson, net-zero does not go far enough. We are in the midst of a planetary deficit that means decreasing overspending until we reach net zero will not get us out of the hole. We need to be *investing* in our planet, replenishing and restoring the overdrawn accounts of natural and social systems. Lastly, and most importantly, "limits approaches are not engaging and that is a big

³⁹⁸ However, as Robinson says "an important point is that not all human activity is, or can be, regenerative. Some limits and constraints, and some trade-offs, confront us in particular times and places. But we need to look for activities that can be regenerative, because it is always better to improve human and environmental wellbeing than to simply reduce damage" (personal communication).

problem since sustainability requires major change in our whole way of life at a planetary scale: we have to engage people.”³⁹⁹

However, Robinson’s deeper commitment is to emergent norms. And so, for him, regenerative sustainability has no greater priority than one possible candidate within the larger rubric of procedural approaches to sustainability engagement. Regenerative approaches may emerge, but this depends on the values and interests of the context. Do our procedural commitments really insist we sit back and participate in regenerative conversations only if it emerges on its own? Has the present research traced a different line?

Post-normalcy is an argument for the imaginary world. It is the methodological and institutional leverage that supports the shift from efforts to prove the world real, towards the necessity of proving it imaginary. That is, towards building sustainability within an account of reality that has lost its capacity to separate a ‘natural world’ from cultural worlds. Hulme’s arguments add significant depth to this instinct, going so far as to shift our orientation to things like climate change away from seeing them as ‘problems to be solved’ and instead for the opportunities they present to engage with deeper existential questions in concrete, material ways. I.e. ‘what’s the relationship between my happiness and the health of that stream?’ Flipping the sustainability predicate, it would seem, emerges from both theoretical, philosophical engagement and extensive empirical engagement as well.

Robinson’s regenerative sustainability flows out of these same philosophical and empirical conclusions and for me, emerges as a fundamental reorientation of what sustainability is. If Hulme is right, and the real problems of sustainability are to be understood as opportunities to engage larger human meanings and purposes, then clearly sustainability needs to be regenerative, the opportunity to make things better. The contentious issue here is whether regenerative sustainability contains the procedural commitments to identify crucial issues of what ‘better’ means, in terms of trade-offs, context of measurement (bounding the system), indicators, time frames, etc., or whether procedural sustainability contains the potential for regenerative sustainability should it emerge from within a particular context of engagement.

By the former account, regenerative sustainability works like a PR campaign, creating a more engaging and inspiring headline for sustainability processes while recalibrating what is entailed in sustainability, that we are moving away from trying to resuscitate a scientific object back to a baseline condition, and rather engage a much broader conversation. Procedural approaches enter the picture to deal with the difficult practical issues of how regeneration is to be defined, pursued, measured, etc. Without such procedural approaches at its

³⁹⁹ Robinson, personal communication.

disposal, regenerative sustainability would either lack substance or it would align even more closely with regenerative design in building practices, taking us back into scientific engagements where what constitutes ‘better’ rests on measurements and values drawn from material indicators.⁴⁰⁰

This dissertation argues that procedural and regenerative sustainability are both required, and mutually implicated in achieving a world that honours our commitment to the non-modern in terms of both how we engage with the world and our goals in doing so. But it argues that this notion of sustainability, the “flipped predicate” approach of sustainability in an imaginary world, should be considered fundamentally regenerative. To not do so, is to stand back in order to protect an unhelpful and perhaps disingenuous ‘purity of process’. Recall the music commission from this research, where a creative expert able to speak on behalf of the world of music—the world where meaning and agency awaited us—stood back waiting for music, meaning, and agency to arise from a procedural process. Instead we, the public, found very little of each. This was not because we had nothing to say, but that we were not given any means to say it. The necessary act of translation was omitted, I believe, out of a misplaced notion of purity that tried to run the process in as procedural a manner as possible.

The outcomes of this research into the challenges of procedural engagement were largely negotiations with emergent dynamics. Some identify places where an authoring presence needed to step its own agency back and make room for other agencies to fully integrate lest they prove disruptive (recall the need for better consensus building amongst the ‘invisibles’ of technology and politics). Other outcomes suggested precisely the opposite, where an authorial presence had stepped too far back, made too much room, and failed to structure the process enough for collaborating voices to have the agency such emergent dynamics had explicitly invited *within a particular context that invoked them as a particular public*. The structural ideas put forward in the fourfold path along with the proposed revisions to the role of expertise speak to the responsibility of ‘experts’ to shape the quality of engagement. The insight is that the public we encounter is in large part the public we have *already* produced through the discourse within which our invitation and engagement occurs (music, sustainability, etc.).

These elements speak to the inextricability of our responsibility for what we might have preferred to relate to in a more purified sense.⁴⁰¹ They suggest that we have a responsibility to curate the public along with their range of engagement and their means to do so. To abstain is to do so anyway, as the idea that there exists some purer state of public understanding with which we should seek not to tamper is clearly unfounded.

⁴⁰⁰ In discussion with sustainability building specialist Ray Cole he mentioned that regenerative design is also pushing past this limited framework to define ‘better’ as well, but having similar difficulty in defining and measuring beyond building performance.

⁴⁰¹ And as I have tried to suggest, what creates this ‘preference’, this belief in a more purified approach may have more to do with a persistence of Modernist notions of subject-object dichotomies.

Rather, these examples suggest that we should actively seek ways to structure engagement processes so as to maximize the beneficial impact of emergent interactivity.

Thus I would venture so far as to say that regenerative and procedural approaches are not two options within the category of ‘sustainability’, as if we are comparing a Volkswagen to a Prius. Rather, once we step into the post-normal world (as sustainability suggests we must), the challenge of sustainability goes from a challenge to prove the world real to a challenge to prove the world imaginary, the predicate of sustainability flips, and sustainability, by its very nature, becomes procedural and regenerative. Within a metaphysics of immanence, that is what sustainability *is*.

8.7 Flipped Predicate and Flattened Ontology (parameters of a post-normal world)

As is evident from the two chapters that make up the concluding discussion of this research, there are two simultaneous interests here. First: a desire to understand better a particular conception of artistic agency, where it comes from, and how we might use it. This was an attempt to address frustrations found within the art-sustainability relationship by experimenting with various prescriptive premises and instincts. The outcomes of this approach suggest breaking artistic agency into distinct categories of behavioural and ontological priorities, with a proposed category of ‘artistic ontologists’ that speak primarily to the latter capacity, and the idea of ‘art as a double agent’ to identify a necessary ambiguity with its larger context of practice. Throughout, I have tried to connect art’s ontological agency with an aesthetic priority, world-making and the burden of beauty.

The core prescriptive premise that emerged here is a sense of art as fundamentally epistemological. This idea opened up into a series of interconnected layers, suggesting it is not only a useful prescriptive premise, but descriptive of art-making more fundamentally. The theoretical idea of art as epistemology fell into practice as a notion of creativity as inquiry. This hinted at an interesting provocation of our potentially paradoxical instincts about reality, that we might simultaneously harbor reductive instincts of materialist realism in tandem with a sense of art as ontological, as world-maker. Creativity as inquiry in contemporary contexts led to practices of distributed agency or, in terms more idiomatic to the arts, collaborative creation. This arose as a form of emergent dynamics and demonstrated both the opportunities and challenges of how best to optimize their involvement in practical contexts. In other words, emergent dynamics are not a self-evident virtue to be maximized but rather a tool we must learn to use well.

The second interest examined how these approaches to art connect with a specific set of ideas from within sustainability. Beginning with the ‘environmental ontologist’ position on the challenge of sustainability, a

cluster of ideas centering on fact/value divides, immanence, and procedural approaches to truth and value were charged with metaphysical language and imported into the worlds of artistic creation. What would we discover of the Anthropocene, the non-modern, post-normal world, once within the oracle of the aesthetic? How might the arts refract the challenges and opportunities to live faithfully in a world that is of our own making?

This research placed its wager on metaphysics. That is, the idea that we can slowly but radically revise fundamental notions of the world and thus rather than resolve the dilemmas of present realities, render them inert by changing the world out from underneath them. At Globe 2010 (a bi-annual sustainability conference held in Vancouver), ‘green entrepreneur’ Nicholas Parker said in passing, “I think we are going to get to the other end of this problem and realize it wasn’t that hard to solve.” Anyone that has spent any amount of time in the pessimism of sustainability knows how unusual this remark is. But beyond debating its sanity, its value lies in how well it evokes the way we tend to encounter irresolvable problems.

Dilemmas, it would seem, bear an opposable thumb, deepening our commitment to the structural logic of which they are artifact while simultaneously underwriting its futility. Whether slow or sudden, release from this grip is less likely to come from resolving it in any particular direction and more as a result of the world changing around it. We are left with an intellectual fossil, a time stamp of a different era, a different conception of self and world altogether.⁴⁰²

This is what I believe was behind Parker’s remark, that we may devote too much attention to the volume and style of our barking and not enough to our choice of tree. The tree we’ve been barking up within sustainability challenges is the tree of objects, the tree of properties, the tree of Modernist epistemology. The tree of the real world, whose fruit unleashed this present crisis. This study has been an attempt to evoke and explore the possibility of sustainability in an imaginary world, a challenge to return the subject, that is, ourselves, to our realities.

In this I took great heart in the work of Mike Hulme, building from the conclusion of *Why We Disagree About Climate Change* the idea of ‘flipping the predicate’. Might we now further cement an exploration of environmental degradation as part of a larger quest for meaning, purpose, wisdom, and an unfolding opportunity for human growth and wonderment? ‘Flipping the predicate’ is barking up a new tree. The research on how this caches out remains to be done. For the time being, it offers a decisive and much-needed step away from Modernist approaches to framing and solving sustainability problems.

⁴⁰² Think of the fraught debates as to whether Jesus laughed that plagued the medieval era, or the problem of how not to sail off the edge of the Earth during the early days of the age of exploration.

Still, as we reorient ourselves in this direction, as we return the subject to the world, worries at getting bogged down in the mires of post-modernity's obsession with discourse and subjectivity may be well-founded. The excesses of idealism and lack of any material world kindred to some post-modern instincts would make a perplexing orientation from which to engage sustainability. How do we improve relations with the non-human if we deprivilege their existence so thoroughly? In an effort to avoid getting stuck here I have incorporated Latour's "flattening" or levelling of ontology, where humans, animals, plants, along with inanimate and imaginary beings all exist in the same way, through our capacity to enter relationships, form alliances, and participate in networks. The hope is that meaning and materiality can share the same ontological language, allowing our thinking to take on the post-modern grasp of inevitable discourse, thus making room for us in our world, while not suffering a slide into the nihilism of arbitrariness.

'Flipping the predicate' turns us away from non-human objects as the focus of sustainability (what we might think of as a corrective to too much Modernism). 'Flattening ontology' maintains and animates their presence as essential discussants in our accounting of reality (correspondingly, a corrective to too much Post-modernism). The space that opens up between these conceptual moves is where I suggest we try and grow more adept at seeding the sustainable world.

To this challenge, the empirical context of this research offered an idiom of semiotic agency that insists on a condition of responsiveness (Latour's 'instauration', Steiner's 'presence of an absence'). As I have tried to show, this spirit of attentive inquiry as the fundamental orientation of world-making in the Anthropocene may be a slightly paradoxical disposition, but one that promises to embed a 'sustainability ethic' of a quality neither Modernism nor Post-modernism can offer.

Predictably enough, at the end of this work there are far more questions than answers, as the horizon of sustainability in an imaginary world grows both clear and distant. How exactly do we flip the predicate of sustainability? In other words, how do we turn sustainability controversies into existential opportunities? What opportunities emerge with this reorientation? How do they fill out the broader categories of quality of life, human well-being, happiness, and health? In other words, what is the existential horizon of sustainability in an imaginary world and how do we attach it to present controversies? What bodies of sustainability research can help inform these questions? And how might the idea of the 'flipped predicate' inform them?

How do we flatten ontology? Consider the difficulty McKay had in getting his stick to say anything even he found convincing? How do we resolve the paradoxical problem of integrating our subjectivities into our conceptions of 'the other' without losing sight of it all over again? How do we 'listen with language' when the

stakes are higher than the viability of a stick's relationship to its owner? And how do we involve highly Modernist publics in such activities given larger commitments to emergent norms?

Within the regenerative framework of sustainability, how do we define and measure 'better'? How do we bound a system and identify a vector that captures Robinson's move from 'doing less bad' to 'making things better'? How do we incorporate empirical measurements of efficiency and resilience and yet not be limited or dominated by them? Lastly, how do we approach all these questions using procedural methodologies? How do we navigate that paradoxical space that is both emergent and invested? How do we incorporate emergent dynamics in ways that foster collaborative engagement that is truly creative? And how do we acquire the instincts and capacity of an expertise that can juggle epistemological challenges with the political, semiotic difficulties of meaning and agency?

8.7.1 Postscript

This litany of questions outlines a horizon of the imaginary world, posed from the edge of the real. Within the precincts of academia, the transition from one world to another seems often to be taken up as an effort to sort out in rational, logically consistent ways, the 'right world' to move towards, where 'right' is often assumed to mean 'free of paradox'. We should be so lucky. Instead, I suggest that changes at this scale are likely more of a swap meet, where the present world comes to trade its paradoxes with those of the world that is yet to come. We unearth the old, which lie at the root of present problems, and bury the new in search of redress. Doubtless they too will grow sideways, but with any luck the angle will prove corrective enough where necessary, and creative enough to one day inspire its own unearthing. It is the buoyancy of the floating world that makes a workable palimpsest of human enterprise. The moorings of Modernity are perhaps its greatest transgression.

Though for all the iconoclasm on offer here, how can we not say goodbye to Modernism without gratitude and admiration? It is a narrative that fostered a relationship with the self that remains the foundation of an ennobling human spirit, and with a material world that still astounds for the audacity and fruitfulness of its reach. The shortcomings of its moral visions, epistemological ambitions, and metaphysical corrections have grown apparent under the light it raised above its own self. And it too was marked as much by what it was trying to leave as what it hoped to find. Doubtless we are no more capable fumbling our way out of our worlds than they were of theirs, although perhaps this time with less fondness for utopian visions? Just as Poussin looked back amidst the dawning of the Enlightenment, we too would be wise to remember, *Et in Arcadia Ego*.

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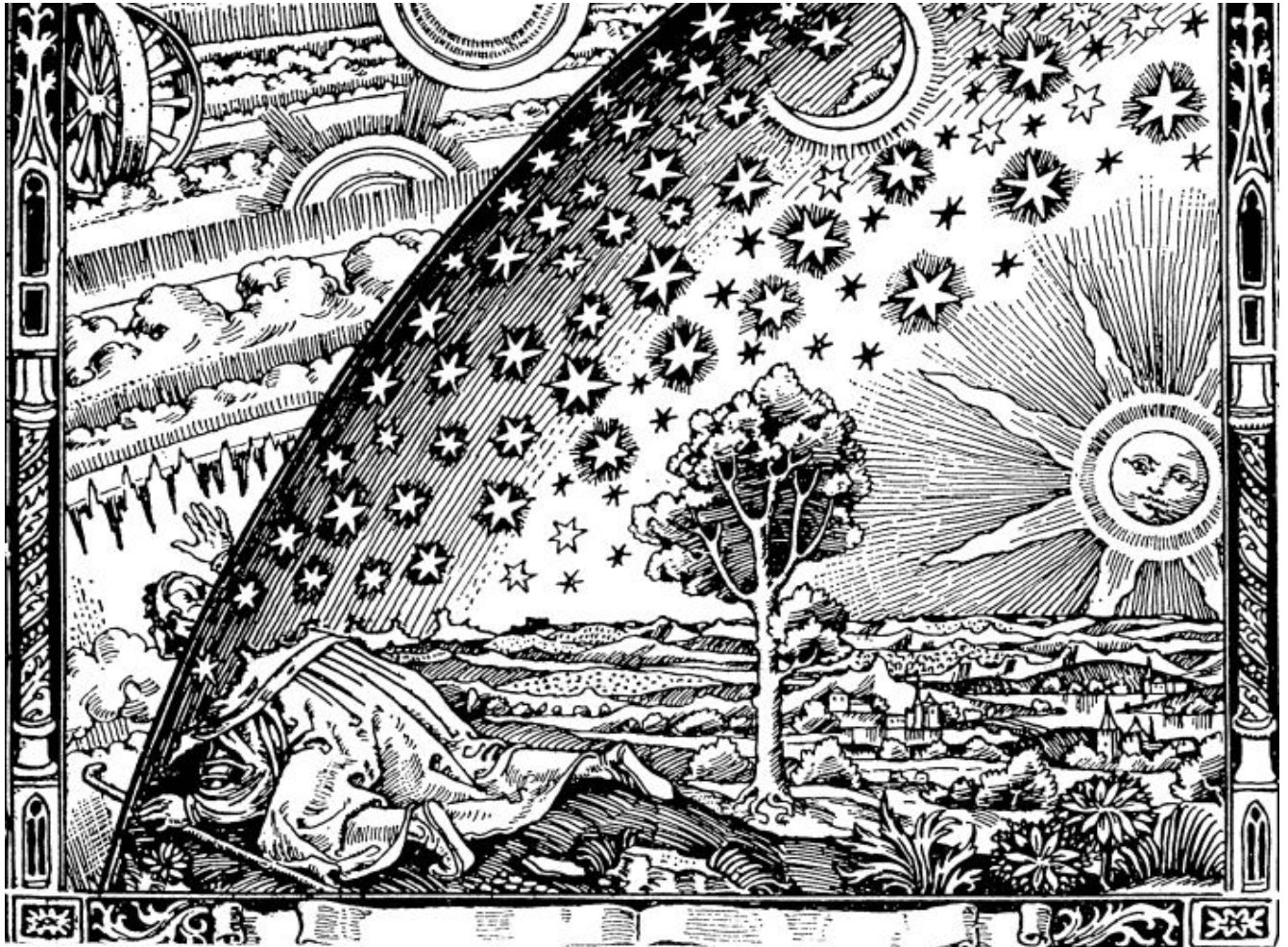
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Appendices

Appendix A - GCC Art Channel Commission Document



The Implicated Subject: Too Late for the Gods, Too Early for Being?

a commission document prepared by

David Maggs in conversation with John Robinson, Derek Kaplan, Don
McKay, Giorgio Magnanensi and Kevin Kerr

for

The Greenest City Conversation Project

Vancouver, February 2011

Introduction

This commission is part of my Doctoral research which I undertook in the interest of revisiting relationships between artistic practice and environmental concern. As a practicing artist increasingly concerned about the health of our planet I was curious as to what, if any, the role of art might be in the struggle to engender more sustainable societies. Admittedly, after a certain exposure to how art was typically being incorporated into this effort, I was disappointed. Often it seemed that art was considered (and even explicitly identified as) "non-traditional" means of conveying established messages of sustainability. There are two problematic assumptions with this. The first is the implication that when cultures traditionally work through questions of identity and values they use surveys and pie charts? As preface to this discussion I find it worth suggesting that the arts are perhaps our *most* traditional means of muddling through our personal and collective dilemmas and we, as artists, should not feel as though we are a last resort, an expressive afterthought to a process that is better left to scientists and politicians.

That art is considered in such terms, however, betrays a more problematic assumption underlying art-environment interactions. That is the belief that the challenge to foster sustainable societies is simply a matter of getting the information across. Here the idea is that if people knew better, they would do better. That is to say, engendering sustainability is a question of awareness, of spreading the message. Under such an account, art suddenly appears as an awesome tool to carry the message, a dramatic, emotional mouthpiece for the science and policy of sustainability, not, however, a unique space of exploration in its own right.

The result is that very often art gets applied to environmental issues along heavily instrumental lines, an expressive translation of known truths, a way of creating an emotionally stirring presentation of the otherwise drab facts of soil erosion, mercury content or glacial melt. The result is clowns acting out pro-recycling behaviours, theatre troupes doing pseudo-medieval morality plays about climate scenarios, or songs trying to reduce emissions by singing about them. The idea here is that art can serve either as an alarm bell of some kind, making us feel the urgency and guilt that should effectively transform behaviour, or as catchy packaging, akin to singing the phone number at the end of an advertisement.⁴⁰³ But if we think of art as more

⁴⁰³ This view is not intended to cast aside the field of environmental art writ large, but to take issue with aspects of the genre that fit the above description. Certainly my caricature does not exhaust what is a broad category with a variety of approaches. Most often, interestingly

fundamentally about possibility and otherness, about luring the imagination into new ways of conceiving of self, other and world, then its use as a 'startling agent' or educational tool might seem a failure to capitalize on its full potential.

While an awkward issue to raise in an academic context, I feel there is a second point to make to those increasingly frustrated at the failure of artistic engagement to produce a 'green citizenry' as anticipated. My suggestion is that this is not evidence of the ultimate intractability of our culture's unsustainable ways, as if to say, 'even this bit of art couldn't make us carbon neutral!' but could simply be that the art wasn't very good. I believe we seek out artistic engagement following recognition that art holds a particular power over our imaginations without acknowledging the hard-won source of that power - talent, technique, discipline, inspiration, etc. In other words, without considering the quality of the artists invited to engage with aspects of environmental concern, and without considering the terms of the invitation, I feel that a lot of art-environment relationships unwittingly undermine the power for which the help of art was sought in the first place.

Within this inquiry, much of the theoretical frame supporting it need not be presented here, but there is one further point that I think does need to be made. This research is interested only a relationship between particular aspects of the environmental crisis and Western art practices. I do not care nor seek to know what consequences that relationship may have for what people do. The point is not to use art to get them to do anything. The point is to explore what sort of artistic language emerges when we align art with a particular aspect of environmental thought that seems appropriate given a body of arguments from post-Marxist thinkers like Herbert Marcuse along with my own instincts following a decade of professional activities.

This may seem ignorant or even dismissive of the urgency with which better practices must be adopted at both individual and collective levels of Western Industrialized societies. My fear is that questions of efficiency and efficacy are asked too quickly of artistic engagement with environmental concern, and suggest this may have prevented artistic languages from beginning the slow, organic process of evolving and realizing a language that was both idiomatic to its own capacities and (therefore) able to foster a more rich, expansive and nuanced existential dimension of environmental concern. That one

enough, the art that does fit the above description is often the result of collaborations between artists and the academy and not the practices of artists left to their own musings.

of the most dramatic junctures in human history gets so often reduced to debates about toilet paper suggests we might want to try something different.

The purpose of this commissioning document is not to dictate a set of ideas with the aim of seeing their faithful translation into art. Rather I hope to establish a 'space of the problem' as clearly as I can, offer the following discussion along with suggestions for further reading and then allow the artistic engagements genuine room for exploration. The substance of what follows is my own sense of a particular strand of the environmental woes of the West, one which I feel suggests a more fruitful site of engagement for its arts. Rather than rules to a game I wish everyone to play, I would prefer this discussion to be treated as the field itself. To further the open-ended desire behind the commission, this text is followed by a bibliography for further reading. Let your interests take you where they will.

Commission Content

The broad stroke of this project can be found in a line I came across recently in the poem "The Thinker as Poet" by Martin Heidegger. It struck me as an ideal riddle from which to unpack a view of the environmental crisis that I have been struggling to articulate:

*"We are too late for the gods, and too early for Being."*⁴⁰⁴

In what follows, my reading of this line will no doubt indulge a certain opportunism. Nonetheless, the way I make sense of what it is to be 'too late', who 'the gods' are, what 'Being' might mean, and the problem of being 'too early' opens a view of our current environmental woes that invites us to contemplate this ever-looming crisis in unique and, I hope, fruitful terms.

I will break the exploration into two parts, one for each clause. In seeking what it means for us to be "too late for the gods" I will rest primarily on the work of science and technology scholar Bruno Latour. One of the central features of modern, industrialized society that Latour consistently critiques is what he calls 'the Modern Constitution.'⁴⁰⁵ According to Latour (and many others) we, as post-Enlightenment civilizations, are governed by a tenacious intellectual

⁴⁰⁴ Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hopfstadter, trans. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. 4.

⁴⁰⁵ Latour, 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 34.

framework or worldview, what Alfred North Whitehead calls 'the bifurcation of nature':

What I am essentially protesting against...is the bifurcation of nature into two systems of reality, which, in so far as they are real, are real in different senses. One reality would be the entities such as electrons which are the study of speculative physics. This would be the reality which is there for knowledge; although in this theory it is never known. For what is known is the other sort of reality, which is the byplay of the mind. Thus there would be two natures, one is the conjecture and the other is the dream.⁴⁰⁶

In other words, the world of fact and the world of value, the world of object and the world of subject, are discrete domains. The key to modernity, and historically speaking imagining the world within a 'Westernized' idiom, is in keeping them that way. I, as subject, am removed from the world as object. The Earth and all its non-human mechanisms and occupants go on conducting their affairs according to unchanging mechanical laws, while humans wash around in the mutable world of value, opinion, and experience critically unconnected. Furthermore, knowledge of the world 'as it really is', objective and absolute, involves coming to terms with it independent of any subjective content. The way the world really is is the way the world would be whether I was here to experience it as such or not. Such a notion of separateness Latour refers to as the 'Modern Constitution' identifying it as the very root of our environmental woes.

In describing the awakening of Enlightenment thought, Latour writes, "the obscurity of the olden days, which illegitimately blended together social needs and natural reality, meanings and mechanisms, signs and things, gave way to a luminous dawn that cleanly separated material causality from human fantasy [object from subject]." ⁴⁰⁷ The natural world becomes the product of one set of laws, the social world, another. The natural world becomes an objective domain, whose structure and logic can be determined absolutely, while the social world becomes subjective, the malleable space of value and opinion, superfluous to any worthy account of 'reality'.

This tidy split, nature from culture, was driven in large part by Western Europe's need to repair itself socially, politically and epistemically from the upheavals of religious warfare. One

⁴⁰⁶ Whitehead. 1920. 30.

⁴⁰⁷ Latour, 1993. 35.

particularly explicit chapter in this process of actively cleansing the subjective from the objective is documented by Stephen Schapin and Simon Schafer in their work on Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes, titled *Leviathan and the Air Pump*. Latour follows Schapin and Schafer's analysis of the development of scientific epistemology and its relationship to public and political life:

Boyle wondered how to put an end to civil wars. By compelling matter to be inert, by asking God not to be directly present, by constructing a new closed space in a container where the existence of the vacuum would become manifest, by renouncing the condemnation of witnesses for their opinions. No *ad hominem* accusation will prevail any longer, Boyle said; no human witness will be believed; only nonhuman indicators and instruments observed by gentlemen will be considered trustworthy.⁴⁰⁸

This quote from Latour is rich in that it highlights the relationship between political circumstances and the pursuit of a 'nature' that could act as the irrefutable arbiter of reality; one that is free of 'contamination' by divine agency and mere 'opinion' yet contingent upon the observation and consensus necessary to build *trust*. In other words, in splitting the natural from the social it is important to note that in addition to instruments and method, Boyle relied on representation, witnessing, opinion, consensus, belief, in other words, politics.

This slightly back-handed approach yielded a concept of nature that was transcendent, objective, "foreign, remote and forever hostile", yet, at the same time, well-possessed.⁴⁰⁹ It was built from what Latour calls the tandem forces of *mediation* and *purification*. Mediation, the "fabricating of [Nature's] laws in the laboratory" signifies the capacity of society to interact with this 'foreign and remote' entity that was nature. In other words, when Latour speaks of mediation he is usually referring to scientific interactions with the natural world. Purification, on the other hand, was the act of keeping such interactions 'off the books' so to speak. By keeping mediation out of sight, it was possible to construct this public sense of nature as objective, foreign and remote. This puts the politically stabilizing image of *transcendence* into the nascent epistemology of science and allows a new kind of society to take comfort in the idea that it has left subjective waters and is now charting the very objective world

⁴⁰⁸ Latour. 1993. 83.

⁴⁰⁹ Latour, 1993. 30.

itself, the only one there *really* is. A world that "completely escapes all human fabrication."⁴¹⁰

However specious the purification of mediations in scientific epistemology may have been, the effects were undeniably powerful. Under what Latour refers to as 'the Modern Constitution', the bifurcation of nature offered a new transcendence to replace the suddenly ambiguous, distant or absent God of post-reformation Europe. The enthusiasm surrounding the idea of knowing the world objectively and emerging from the messy and violent compromises of belief to establish reality 'as it really is' must have been contagious. And not without reason. Latour describes the relationship that could now emerge between an immanent society and its newly minted transcendent nature:

They are going to be able to make Nature intervene at every point in the fabrication of their societies while they go right on attributing to Nature its radical transcendence; they are going to be able to become the only actors in their own political destiny, while they go right on making their society hold together by mobilizing Nature...We must admit that this [Modern Constitution] is a rather neat construction that makes it possible to do everything without being limited by anything.⁴¹¹

As an analogy, we might think of this somewhat duplicitous relationship with a 'nature' that is both transcendent *and* available serving as something of a potent idol. Thanks to the forces of purification, society will believe whatever comes out of nature's mouth, thanks to the forces of mediation new priests with powerful interests find creative ways of making it talk.

As with so much of human endeavour, it's easy to view this transition as yet another chapter in our forgivable desire for a bit of control over our lives. In using scientific methodologies and instruments to describe the world in absolute terms, away from the contamination of opinion and belief, we began a relationship with the natural world marked by prediction and domination. If pre-Enlightenment humans related to their environments by gazing helplessly up at the sky wondering what was going to happen next, we moderns had found means to leave such uncertainty behind. With just a few consequences worth mentioning.

⁴¹⁰ Latour. 1993. 31.

⁴¹¹ Latour, 1993. 32.

The first of these is internal, a psychological, emotional event within the modern citizen often identified as the 'crisis of meaning':

Since the time of Locke, philosophers...have forced upon common sense a rather stark choice between two types of meaninglessness: either the meaninglessness of senseless but real nature; or the meaninglessness of meaningful but unreal values.⁴¹²

This choice of "'meaninglessness one' or 'meaninglessness two'"⁴¹³ creates a condition where the human subject becomes "infinitely remote from the world"⁴¹⁴ and the world, infinitely remote from the human subject. If we pick the meaninglessness of senseless but real nature we indulge 'truths about world' but impoverish experience, while if we choose the meaninglessness of sensual by unreal values we insist on the integrity of experience while losing conversation with the world. Subject and object, experience and reality, separate, insoluble compounds.

Different scholars have written in different ways about the crisis of meaning stemming from the reductionist objectivity of modern science, and not always driven by environmental agendas.⁴¹⁵ But the crisis of meaning attaches to the crisis of environment in that under the Modern Constitution real relationships with a real world are unavailable. In a world where our subjective capacities are irrelevant it is too easy to abandon our agency as a responsible public for that world and cease to be custodians of our own reality. This 'inner consequence' of the Modern Constitution, the crisis of meaning, then has an outer consequence, the massive proliferation in what Latour calls *hybrids*.

Very simply, a hybrid is a mixture, a thing whose genealogy cannot be accurately charted without citing both natural and cultural forces.⁴¹⁶ Within the Modern Constitution it is chimera, a myth, a monster. It should not exist. If the separation of the subjective from the objective was successful, then the subject has no role in producing the object, it merely comes to know it. However, rather than the subject studying its object across the sanctified divide of the Modern Constitution, Latour's field of Science Studies has done well in the past thirty years to demonstrate how mediations in the form of scientific interventions into the natural world mix cultural agencies with natural ones to produce hybrids. This all flew comfortably below

⁴¹² Latour, 2008. 12.

⁴¹³ Latour, 2008. 13.

⁴¹⁴ Latour, 1993. 56.

⁴¹⁵ Taylor, Charles, 1991. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁴¹⁶ Latour, 1993. 50.

the radar of the Modern Constitution because purification, that which "renders the work of mediation ... invisible, unthinkable, unrepresentable" consistently classified these hybrids into the domain of the purely 'natural'. In other words, in a very important sense the Modern Constitution has been cheating, and by tucking its handiwork out of sight, allowing "the expanded proliferation of the hybrids whose existence, whose very possibility, it denies."⁴¹⁷

It may be obvious that the environmental crisis is largely made of hybrids. Collapsing fish stocks, polluted water systems, deforestation and soil erosion, a changing climate - all are Latourian hybrids, entities crumbling thanks to a destabilizing parentage of natural and cultural interactions. Hybrids are, in a sense, bastards, entities born out of an unacknowledged union and tucked out of sight, rendered non-existent by the Modern Constitution. We know well however, that the customs of state and society will keep a bastard safely sidelined only for so long. One of literature's remarkable bastards, Edmund, at the outset of *King Lear* is resolved on this point, his actions driving the plot to its tragic end. "I grow; I prosper. Now, gods, stand up for bastards!" (I, 2). And it would seem as the climate swells with carbon, bacteria outwit their poisons, and eutrophic lakes bloom suffocating blankets of algae across their surfaces, that the gods have heard them, and we can ignore them no longer. Or else it would seem that the old men of the Modern Constitution will, in effect, be burying their daughters yet again.

What does it mean to acknowledge these hybrid entities? To accept that the Modern Constitution was something of a sham? To confront the idea that the subject and the object never parted company as we once thought? Perhaps it means nothing more than accepting the first part of Heidegger's phrase, that we are, by now, too late for the gods.

Recall the opening scene from *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*: Dr. Jones has penetrated the inner sanctum of an ancient temple and is standing face to face in awe of the solid gold head of a pagan idol resting on a weight-sensitive pillar of stone. He takes a bag of sand from his supplies, lets it bob in his hand, fastidiously trying to match its weight to the imagined weight of the golden deity. He opens the bag and lets a trickle of sand spill onto the floor. If the stone pillar detects even the slightest change in weight it will set off the most elaborate series of booby traps a blockbuster film can deliver, spikes and arrows shooting from the walls, pillars toppling, floors crumbling above a yawning crevasse and the iconic

⁴¹⁷ Latour, 1993. 34.

giant bowling ball of stone hurtling after the fleeing hero and his stolen god.

When Robert Boyle and his Enlightenment cohorts slipped God off the stone pedestal of Europe, they deftly swapped it with the sandbag of science. One god replaced another. The world remained safely and comfortably the product of forces that were foreign, remote, and transcendent. And it was a long while before anyone noticed the pedestal eventually detect the difference and slowly start to spring its traps.

With the bastards turning up at the party, hybrids intruding into the tidy world of the Modern Constitution, comes the irrefutable evidence of our fingerprints all over our realities. Being too late for the gods, to me, means that simply handing the world back, whether to gods of science or faith, or continuing to pretend we hadn't taken hold of it in the first place, is no longer an option. We can no longer pretend that our worlds are the result of transcendent agencies, objects remote from the actions of subjects. We can abdicate our realities no more. They have returned to us in startling form, like the creature confronting Dr. Frankenstein on the mountain, we banish them and claim innocence at our peril.

The idea that we are 'too late' to persist in relating to our realities through a transcendent god of science, in whose capacity we conceive nature as an objective, absolute entity is well-illustrated by the problem of climate change. Here we find science's longstanding capacity for prediction and control undermined by its capacity to generate unpredictability and risk. In the words of Science and Technology Studies scholar Sheila Jasanoff, "Scientific and technical advances bring unquestioned benefits, but they also generate new uncertainties and failures, with the result that doubt continually undermines knowledge, and unforeseen consequences confound faith in progress."⁴¹⁸

In what is surely one of history's great ironies, science, after helping us abandon our pre-modern selves, stuck, as we were, gazing into the sky wondering what is to befall us next, is the very means by which we return to such a state under the spectre of an unstable climate. In mournful recapitulation we stand now, so very much like our pre-modern selves, staring once more into the sky wondering what

⁴¹⁸ Jasanoff, S. (2003) *Technologies of Humility: Citizen Participation in Governing Science*. *Minerva*, 41. 224.

is to befall us next. The crucial difference, and the substance behind Heidegger's prescient thought, is that the actions we took to eliminate uncertainty are precisely those by which it is engendered.⁴¹⁹ It is too late to give the gods back their sky, not because acts of faith or of science have no further place, but because it does not belong to them anymore.

One can almost hear gates of Eden clang shut. Yet contrary to how we've interpreted that sound throughout history, and contrary to what so much of the environmental movement seems to long for, it is not the sound of the gates shutting us out once and for all, but shutting us in.

Being 'too late for the gods' can be understood as the need to resign ourselves from the habitual move of ascribing our realities, our worlds, to remote transcendences - God, gods, science or other metaphysical attempts to explain our realities in terms of some supreme remoteness. In such a conception of reality the genesis of the object is distant from the acts of the subject. Agency is minimal to nil, as is responsibility. It is an innocence Western industrial societies can no longer claim, and one which many other cultures seem never to have bothered with in the first place.

What interests me most about the environmental crisis becoming such a present, pressing theme in Western culture is that it adds such materiality to philosophical and existential debates. If the modern West could previously dismiss probing 'the human condition' as superfluous to 'the real world', more and more these elusive existential dilemmas are exerting themselves in precisely this arena. The great and unanswerable questions of being alive are finding an ever more central, pivotal and material urgency as the need to rethink the very fundamentals of our culture becomes impossible to ignore.

What then might Heidegger have meant when he said, way back in 1927, that we are "too early for Being"? I am far from a Heidegger scholar so I confess any comprehensive discussion of Heidegger's notion of 'Being' is beyond me. However, the discussion that Heidegger's philosophy invites offers precisely the kinds of metaphors we are looking for in how we've been approaching the relationship between artistic engagement and environmental concern. Briefly, this hinges on a reality composed of revealed and concealed realms and the capacity of human existence, human awareness and human action to bring about

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Ulrich Beck. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. New Delhi: Sage. 1992.

and exist inseparably from them. In other words, an inextricably entangled subject.

Heidegger's reality and the objects or events which populate it bear resemblance to an iceberg, where the full being of any given thing, is comprised of both visible and invisible elements. Graham Harman, in his work *Heidegger Explained* (2007) elaborates:

Most of Heidegger's philosophy is dominated by endless repetitions of a single recurrent duel between concealed and revealed, sheltering and clearing, or past and future...the realms of shadow and visibility.⁴²⁰

Crucially, however, this relationship between the revealed and the concealed, what is available and what remains hidden, is characterized not by space, but by time:

On the one hand, things hide from view and go about simply being whatever they are (which Heidegger calls past). On the other hand, things become present with certain characteristics through being interpreted as tools, weapons, or items of entertainment (which Heidegger calls future). Together these two dimensions unite in a new kind of present, since the world is dynamically torn between the being of things and the oversimplified surfaces through which they appear to us. The world is a constant passage back and forth, between shadow and light - and this endless passage is called time.⁴²¹

This 'dynamic tearing' is, for Heidegger, the essence of Being. It is the awareness (of which we are uniquely capable as humans) that our experience lies along a tension between the thing's hidden, unseen, unknown, unconsidered and yet possible aspects and the more simplified relationships we have with them.

Heidegger refers to this as the 'ontological difference': "the constant shadowy interplay between concealed Being and any particular beings that emerge."⁴²² For humans, our own 'Being', our own tension between the hidden and revealed in ourselves lies in our capacity "to perform the ontological difference"⁴²³, to engage with experience as comprised of both possible and present aspects. "We humans are able to

⁴²⁰ Graham Harman. *Heidegger Explained*. Open Court Books. 2007. 83.

⁴²¹ Harman, 2007. 2

⁴²² Harman, 2007. 48.

⁴²³ Harman, 2007. 46.

rethink the being of beings only because we are not merely trapped in the level of things as they appear to us. Instead, we have already partly risen above the appearances that surround us and already peer to some extent into their depths."⁴²⁴ This is actually a fairly commonly held idea, that what makes humans unique is their capacity to posit alternate possible realities, to live in a world while constantly imagining another one. For Heidegger it is the process by which we bestow being on ourselves and on the entities and events that populate our experience.

In the [1929] essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art', Heidegger will give new labels to the revealed and concealed aspects of experience. The revealed he calls 'world' and the concealed he refers to as 'earth':

The world is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people. The earth is the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing. World and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated. The world grounds itself on the earth and earth juts through world. But the relation between world and earth does not wither away into the empty unity of opposites unconcerned with one another. The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it. As self-opening it cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there.⁴²⁵

This nomenclature gives Heidegger a new verb, 'to world', to bring the sheltering, concealing earth, the 'hidden' into a revealed realm of meaning and relationship. Harman gives the example of Kepler reconfiguring planetary motion as a moment of worlding, a moment of being when he glimpsed the concealed and in so doing offered a new image of the revealed.⁴²⁶

It is perhaps worth reiterating that Heidegger's idea of the revealed and the concealed, world and earth, are temporal and not spatial. This is odd if we consider time in terms of an objective, separate flow cut off from the subject, ticking away whether we are here or not. But for Heidegger, time is made by our subjectivity, our whole sense of time

⁴²⁴ Harman, 2007. 46.

⁴²⁵ Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hofstadter, trans. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. 47.

⁴²⁶ Harman, 2007. 46.

is built from our being-in-the-world. As he says, "the actuality of what has been [past] resides in its possibility [subject-dependent future]. The possibility becomes in each case manifest as the answer to a living question that sets before itself a futural present in the sense of 'what can we do?'"⁴²⁷ In other words, the past is not an objective entity that can be explored as if it were some great room filled with the catalogued objects and events of history, the past is produced by and through our hopes for the future: "We are thrown from the *past*, which attunes us to the world; we understand this world in terms of possibilities that we project in the *future*."⁴²⁸

This example of the past being something produced by our subjectivity, something built just as much from our anticipation of the future as our recollection of previous events speaks to how our 'being' is a direct refutation of the Modern Constitution. If it is our being, our capacity to perform the ontological difference that grants being to beings, that yields a reality marked by hidden and revealed, remembered and possible, then there is clearly no separating the subject from the objects of its attention. The Modern Constitution cannot keep its bifurcation intact. The subject bleeds into its own realities through Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*, a german word usually translated as 'being-there'. *Dasein* refers to us, "the entities who have an understanding of Being."⁴²⁹ In our capacity to engage with an entity as both hidden and revealed we ourselves become 'being-there', process rather than thing, we become a verb, an action, a moving back and forth across a boundary.

Why? Why is *Dasein* or 'being-there' something we *become* rather than something we *do*? Certainly,

one may object that, like it or not, the human brain is enclosed by the human skull. This is true, of course - and the brain should stay there. But the process of human existence does not take place merely inside the skull. It occurs when the human body interacts with the beings around it in such a way that those beings reveal themselves in their depths of meaning. If our connections to other beings were cut, we would not end up inside our mind - we would end up *without a mind at all*. (Experiments with sensory deprivation tanks show that after a time without any sensations, people lose themselves in hallucinations and disjointed thoughts; their ability to be *Dasein* is temporarily jeopardized.) The mind

⁴²⁷ Polt, Heidegger: An Introduction. 97

⁴²⁸ Polt, Richard. Heidegger : an introduction. Cornell University Press. Ithaca, NY: 1999. 97.

⁴²⁹ Polt. 1999, 29.

is dependent on minding - caring about other beings, which show up as mattering to us.⁴³⁰

With the mind as verb that we 'have' only in the action of 'minding' - only as Dasein, engaging in experience -

it is not just that we happen to be in a world, a 'there', rather, our 'there' is so essential to us that we would be nothing at all without it. Conversely, it would be nothing without us...We are 'Being-there' in the sense that Dasein is in such a way as to be its 'there'.⁴³¹

Hence Dasein is what we are, not what we do, and in being Dasein we are inseparable from our surroundings, our moments of relationship that lie beyond the confines of our 'self' as traditionally defined.

Heidegger is pushing us to appreciate the ways we become the arenas, contexts, environments and objects of our experience, and, via our engagement with them through the temporal ingredients of memory and possibility, they become us. In this dissolution of the separation between subject and object however, lies a danger in assuming too recursive a relationship, as if mind and context are nothing more than mirrors facing each other in sweet replication. Recall, however that Dasein "always rises above beings [ie. particular entities]...Dasein is actually nothing but transcendence."⁴³² In other words, we become "the there", we become "being-there" not by engaging in an unquestioning manner with what is, but the opposite, by being part of the agencies that *make* it what it is for us: "Dasein is inherently something alien to nature, human existence is a fateful tear or rupture in the fabric of the world."⁴³³ In other words, it is in rupturing, in the injection of the possible, that we bleed into our realities coterminously.

But this is not simply a theoretical issue to be clarified, it is a practical problem for our relationship with being and Dasein in general. If Dasein is constantly ripping at the fabric of its world, then we are constantly uprooting ourselves, constantly digging up and replanting our realities. While Heidegger aligns this compulsion of Dasein with authenticity, one might wonder why such restlessness would be a virtue? "Why is homelessness [and anxiety] more primordial than

⁴³⁰ Polt. 1999, 57.

⁴³¹ Polt. 1999, 30.

⁴³² Harman, 2007. 51.

⁴³³ Harman, 2007. 52.

being at home? When Heidegger makes this claim, he seems to be saying that we can never depend on an unshakeable foundation for our world. The world is a tissue of meanings that are fragile, contingent, and subject to reinterpretation."⁴³⁴

Being and Dasein are marked by a restless tearing of the fabric of our world, yet for Heidegger this is the authentic self, the essence, as we have seen, of what it means to be human. When we come up short of this essence we have lapsed into a fallen state. Failing to perform the ontological difference leaves the concealed earth to withdraw undetected as the world grows self-evident around us. 'What is' becomes nothing more than what appears to be. The fabric of our world spreads itself over our existence unquestioned. The human becomes "always absorbed in the things of its world and unaware of its own deeper being, failing to grasp their turbulent ambiguous depths."⁴³⁵

Given however that our essence is restless, homeless, tearing at our realities, a little fallenness is perhaps understandable? "Falling is tempting - not only is falling necessary for our routine functioning, but we tend to indulge in falling even when we have an opportunity for a non-routine profound but disconcerting experience."⁴³⁶ We become trapped in the self-evidence of a particular world without capacity to rupture its fabric and shift the revealed by glimpsing, expressing and sharing its concealed aspects.

Could Wordsworth have had something similar in mind when he wrote,

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

Its Heideggerian resonance is notable, a self-evident world, past and future, a disconnected subject who has undervalued and discarded its powers to unlock the grip of the bustling present.

Specific to our current age, according to thinkers like Latour and others, the way in which the world is 'too much with us' now is in having worlded ourselves into an unworlded world. Under the governance of the Modern Constitution the subjective act of making a world denies

⁴³⁴ Polt. 1999, 78.

⁴³⁵ Harman, 2007. 44.

⁴³⁶ Polt. 1999, 76.

the agency of the subject by ascribing that world to an objective account of nature via science. Our world becomes a collection of objective facts, and the identity we take on as subjects is one of utter disconnection. Not only do we fail to employ our capacity for Being, but we have an epistemological, ontological, metaphysical worldview whose very structure denies its validity. It is precisely a sort of 'implicated subject', in a Heideggerian sense, that the Modern Constitution was designed to eradicate.

So to say we are "too early for Being" may be as simple as saying we still lie very much within the grip of the Modern Constitution. We lack the imaginative resources or the conceptual will or the material urgency to think our way out of this bifurcated age. Or at least that was the case. Perhaps the present state of environmental concern means that we are less and less too early for a transition out of the 'modernist worldview' and more and more prepared to confront the awkward task of imagining our way towards something new.

According to Heidegger, our current understanding of Being has led us to an empty life of manipulation and calculation - a dead end. We are alienated from ourselves and from the universe, because we thoughtlessly understand beings as mere presence-at-hand objects to be described mathematically and controlled technologically...we have to refresh our sense of Being.⁴³⁷

Like Latour, Heidegger walks us to the last point on our map and insists there is yet farther to go. However, unlike Latour, Heidegger seems convinced that there are ways to travel without map. In other words the boundaries of our conceptual universe do not equate with the boundaries of our imaginative universe. Drawing on his phenomenological background, on a belief in the power and import of experience, he offers a fairly direct prescription. In the words of Iain Thompson:

Heidegger thinks that humanity's fundamental experience of reality changes over time (sometimes dramatically) [in other words, and to extend the metaphor, the map gets redrawn] and he suggests that the work of art helps explain the basic mechanism of this historical transformation of intelligibility. Because great art works inconspicuously to establish, maintain, and transform humanity's historically-variable sense of what is and what matters, Heidegger emphasizes that "art is the becoming and

437

Polt. 1999, 132.

happening of truth." Put simply, great artworks help establish the implicit ontology and ethics through which an historical community understands itself and its world. In keeping with this initially strange doctrine of ontological historicity, Heidegger understands "truth" ontologically as the historically-dynamic disclosure of intelligibility in time.⁴³⁸

With truth as an historically-dynamic disclosure of intelligibility in time, and art involved in the maintenance and transformation of such a floating entity, artists assume an auspicious place within a Heideggerian reality.

Artworks function as ontological paradigms, serving their communities as "models of" and "models for" reality ... capable of overcoming the inertia of existing traditions and moving the interconnected ontological and ethical wheels of history, either giving us a new sense of what is and what matters or else fundamentally transforming the established ontology and ethics through which we make sense of the world and ourselves.⁴³⁹

Art is an agent of change within a self-evident world. In a beautiful phrase, Heidegger says, "Whenever great art happens - that is, when there is a beginning - a *push enters history*, and history either starts up or starts again."⁴⁴⁰

From an environmental perspective, what sort of push would be useful now? If Latour and many other thinkers are right in saying that we cannot solve the environmental crisis within the Modern Constitution, then the push we need is one towards being, a push out of our bifurcated realities and into a grasp of ourselves as *Dasein*, being-there, implicated subjects in the realities of our experience. For this, the tool of art is ready-at-hand.

In 'The Origin of a Work of Art' Heidegger explains why he assigns art its special place relative to the question of being. When we make equipment we are 'worlding glimpsed earth'. We are rupturing the fabric of the world as it is for us now, redrawing the maps, by

⁴³⁸ Thomson, Iain. "Heidegger's Aesthetics" entry in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. February 4 2010. Available online at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/> accessed December 1, 2010.

⁴³⁹ Thompson, Iain. 2010.

⁴⁴⁰ Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hopfstadter, trans. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. 74.

reaching into the hidden, the concealed, and pulling something new into the realm of meaning. We are inventing the compass, the computer, the light bulb. We are remaking our world through a performance of the ontological difference. But unlike art, when we make equipment, the 'earth' is, as Heidegger says, "used up". There is no remaining presence of 'earth' in the 'world-as-equipment', "because it is determined by its usefulness and serviceability."⁴⁴¹ It, like the world it creates, is self-evident. "The material [earth] is all the better and more suitable *the less it resists perishing* in the equipmental being of the equipment." Equipment is less ideal if it cues possibility. A hammer's destiny is to pound nails.

When we make art however, there is a desire for the material, the 'earth', to *resist* perishing in the work-being of the artwork. "The sculptor uses stone just as the mason uses it, in his own way. But he does not use it up...the painter also uses pigment, but in such a way that colour is not used up but rather only now comes to shine forth. To be sure, the poet also uses the word - not, however, like ordinary speakers and writers who have to use them up, but rather in such a way that the word only now becomes and remains truly a word."⁴⁴² 'Truly a word' meaning the *Being* of the word; the word composed of both its meanings and its possibilities, its world and its earth, the revealed and hidden aspects pulling us towards its sense-making, hermeneutic potential while at the same time sending us beyond, into the uncapturable aspects of its evocation.

As Heidegger says, "To work-being there belongs the setting up of a world."⁴⁴³ Making art is a worlding act. But unlike the case of equipment, the work "does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth *for the very first time* and to come into the Open of the work's world"⁴⁴⁴ (my italics). The hidden aspect of Being, the ice beneath the water, the 'earth' of our 'worlds' "appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is by nature undisclosable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up."⁴⁴⁵ (This perhaps explains why 'earth' was a replacement term for what Heidegger had originally called 'the nothing'⁴⁴⁶ - which nonetheless had a verb form - "the essential strife whereby the "nothing noths"). Art is invaluable to the task of readying ourselves for Being, because "the

⁴⁴¹ Heidegger, 1975. 44.
⁴⁴² Heidegger, 1975. 46.
⁴⁴³ Heidegger, 1975. 44.
⁴⁴⁴ Heidegger, 1975. 45.
⁴⁴⁵ Heidegger, 1975. 46.
⁴⁴⁶ Thompson, Iain. 2010.

work moves the earth itself into the Open of a world and keeps it there. *The work lets the earth be an earth*"⁴⁴⁷ (italics original).

The second contribution of the artistic frame to the challenge of Being derives from the first. If we can experience events (ie. artworks) where earth is not used up, but exists in a 'striving' between earth and world, then the act of worlding becomes explicit. Art can move us towards Being through its capacity to awaken us to our own acts of worlding. In the 'Origins' essay, Heidegger meditates on a painting by Van Gogh:

Our phenomenological encounter with Van Gogh's painting shows us that its meaning is neither located entirely in the object standing over against us nor is it simply projected by our subjectivity onto an inherently meaningless work: the work's meaning must instead be inconspicuously accomplished in our own engagement with the work.⁴⁴⁸

It is vital to note that meaning happens neither within the subject nor the object, the agenda is neither idealist (reality is as we think it to be) nor realist (reality is the material properties of the world). "It is crucial for Heidegger that we not reinterpret this encounter as a subject's selective cognitive and perceptual uptake of an objective world."⁴⁴⁹

This insistence on what poet Don McKay calls 'inbetweenity' is the process by which we go from 'being-and-the-world' to 'being-in-the-world', from subject/object to Dasein, to 'being the there'. Meaning, truth, self, world, all take place in the encounter, in the event. "Our encounter with the work teaches us that meaning does not happen solely in the art object of the viewing subject but instead takes place, we could say, between us and the work." For Heidegger, this is not restricted to art, but "is an ontological truth; it holds true of human existence in general... 'the being of the between'... Art teaches us to become what we already are by allowing us lucidly to undergo the transition from understanding and experiencing ourselves as meaning-bestowing subjects standing over against an objective world to recognizing that, at a deeper level, we are always implicitly participating in the making-intelligible of our worlds."

⁴⁴⁷ Heidegger, 1975. 45.

⁴⁴⁸ Thompson, Iain. 2010.

⁴⁴⁹ Thompson, Iain. 2010.

Though it appears only as a footnote in his article on Heidegger's *Aesthetics*, the following paragraph by Iain Thompson makes as clear a statement about the nature of this commission as any I can offer:

In *Being and Time* (1927), the claim that existence always-already "stands-out" into temporally-structured intelligibility is presented as a phenomenological description of how we ordinarily encounter ourselves when we are not paying attention to the encounter. In "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1936), however, such "existence" no longer simply describes the way we always-already are; it now becomes an existential task to become Dasein by realizing what we already are implicitly. Heidegger thus writes that the goal of "The Origin of the Work of Art" – "the step toward which everything that has been said up to now leads" (PLT 66/GA5 54) – *is to help us learn from art to become what we are*: To "resolutely" own up to what human existence most truly is, Heidegger writes, means entering into the essential conflict of "earth and world" and thereby encountering the "self-transcendence" of existence in "the sober standing-within the extraordinary awesomeness of the truth that is happening in the work" (PLT 67-8/GA5 55). "The Origin of the Work of Art" thus suggests that art is a particularly direct and revealing actualization of the human essence. For, to be a human being, in Heidegger's terms, is to realize oneself as a world-discloser, struggling to world the earth in the right sort of way.⁴⁵⁰

In the wake of an expiring myth, as we watch the gods depart from the composition of our realities, as science, God, faith, and other transcendences step down from their remote pedestals and join us in the more humble effort to compose our realities with our own hands – this new struggle to 'world the earth in the right sort of way' – we are to be forgiven if there is an awkwardness at this point, a sense of unfamiliarity, an uncertainty as how best to proceed as the disclosers of the worlds we must inhabit. We have not been asked to make our own beds in quite this way before, and certainly we could use all the help we can get.

Heidegger has pointed to art as that which holds up the question of being most clearly in its capacity to both create a world and yet always hint beyond itself at the encompassing earth. He has further identified in the apprehending of a work the capacity for that experience to awaken the witnessing subject to their own acts of worlding, their presence as 'world-disclosers'. He locates these

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Thompson, Iain. 2010.

capacities in Van Gogh, in a Greek Temple, in the poems of Hölderlin, in other words, works that have no direct intention to explicitly address the capacity of art to bring forth an engagement with being, either in the artist or audience connected to the work.

Is it redundant then to commission works explicitly seeking this awareness, this experience? Should we merely talk about existing works in this fashion? I think there are two answers worth considering. First, Heidegger himself changes his tune on our relationship to the question of being, as we have seen. Initially, *Being and Time* (1927) seems to suggest a description of what is the case for humans at all times. Later works however increasingly identify this unique relationship to being as something we can lose, forget, or abandon. I take this latter position as a starting point for the project of seeking ways to "refresh our sense of Being", and permission to be more explicit than his merely descriptive engagement with art was.

Secondly, and with humility, I suggest that even Heidegger ran up against the limits of language. Heidegger himself acknowledged he was unable to articulate his project as fully and accessibly as he might have liked. Granted striking out in such a new direction means language of an old world will always be an awkward tool. This is evident in the many neo-logisms of his work that have never managed to settle into the imagination as robustly as their conceptual challenge demands. If anything, the most effective thing we can do for this kind of challenge is to seek new words, new languages, new metaphors, new ways of inviting, sharing and reporting back from this attempt to experience in Heideggerian fashion. Can we help name the sort of experience that does not lie within the grasp of present linguistic idioms or immediate habits of mind?

"Oh man, I was so *Dasein* this morning" doesn't really help too many people find their out of the Modern Constitution. Can we take the capacities of art to engage the issue of being at an almost structural level and then couple that with an interest in the content presented here in the hopes of opening up realms of experience and/or expression along less bifurcated lines?

The title of the commission offers the thrust of this project in its most reduced form: The implicated subject. As a classical musician, I have developed within an aesthetic tradition that does everything it possibly can to eliminate the presence of the witnessing subject short of kicking them out. It is a bifurcated ritual to be sure. But classical musicians and their art are increasingly lonely objects, looking for the presence of our witnessing subject with ever more

hopefulness. Even we might be ready for Being! Still it is an awkward fit. The language and idiom of this art have developed in ways that model a Cartesian world beautifully. The transcendence is in the object, the witnessing subject has no role to play in this majesty other than to keep quiet.

This model may be more extreme than other disciplines, but generally the arts of the West tend to understand themselves in highly un-Heideggerian terms. So it is my assumption that each artist has a distance to cross, and each crossing will play with different challenges, and enjoy different opportunities. The private conversations of Poetry, the real time public action of the theatre, or concert music, or the open unpredictability of an immersive installation piece. I am eager to see how each work brings us a little closer as subjects to an understanding of our hopelessly entangled relationships with our worlds.

I offer these ideas as a starting point for a conversation that I hope continues long past the conclusion of this research. For now, it is the task of the artist to rip the fabric of this document and engage not only the aspects of its content I have managed to reveal, but the many concealed layers of its possibilities that have been left only hinted at, at best.

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Appendix B - Research Timeline

1. 10-11/2010 – Artist selection - artists were selected on the basis of those who were working in a particular trajectory, those for whom the conceptual material was not overly foreign, those for whom the general themes of the terms of reference of the commission made sense within their current practice.
2. 01-02/11 – Development and delivery commission documents – While the basic themes of the commission were outlined during the selection process, the full document was developed and delivered early in 2011.
3. 01/11- 03-12 - Development of presentation conditions – establishing where the works would be shown and when. This process involved ongoing communication with venues, presenters, marketing support, etc.
4. 04/11 - Developing artist contract identifying fees, expectations of work (size and scope of artwork), delivery deadlines, and terms of use
5. 05/11 - Artist Interview #1 – Giorgio Magnanensi, Derek Kaplan, Kevin Kerr and Don McKay
6. 10/11 – Interview #2 with Derek Kaplan, Don McKay, Giorgio Magnanensi
7. 10/11 – Presentation of Don McKay at Vancouver Writers Festival
8. 11/11 – Poetry Audience interviews
9. 11/11 – Interview #2 with Kevin Kerr, Sarah Sharkey and Mitch Anderson
10. 11-12/2011 – Presentation of *You Are Very Star* at Vancouver Planetarium (theatre work)
11. 01/12 - Interview #3 with Kevin Kerr
12. 02-03/12 – Interviews with theatre collaborators – Kim Collier, David Hudgins, Gina Chiarelli
13. 03/12 – Online theatre survey
14. 03/12 – Interviews with theatre audience
15. 03/12 – Presentation of music and architectural works at CIRS, UBC
16. 03/12 – Interview #3 with Derek Kaplan
17. 03-04/12 – Interviews with music audiences and collaborators
18. 08/12 – Interview #3 with Don McKay
19. 09/12 – Interview #3 with Giorgio Magnanensi