



WHAT STORY DO YOU THINK YOU ARE IN? AND CAN YOU CHANGE IT?

The non-art student's guide to what the hell art is
for in an era of crisis.

Trying to think global or act local, what if the world has been robbed of art thinking in our attempts to get beyond disaster? And is this costing us the Earth? Because thinking and working like artists do could bring alive everything else many planet leaders and sensemakers are desperately trying to create.

Especially if you're trying to find your role in the fearful big picture. Or lead others through it.



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UNSEE THE FUTURE

“Art will activate the more sustainable human tomorrow. And you. Yes, ordinary, dumbass, un-artsyfartsy you.” The non-art student’s guide to what the hell art is for in an era of crisis.

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WAKE UP! YOU are a sleeper agent of the better human future – but you’re missing the trigger word. The best planet-wide plans to arrest the climate crisis are too. Art.

Music artist and social impact storyteller Timo Peach is the bloke from Momo:tempo and the voice of idiosyncratic research cast *Unsee The Future*, and in his playful exploration of “the imperatively possible” he thinks art may be our most vital survival tool in our era of crisis.

In this first book from his findings, he sketches out nine ways we’re not understanding art in everyday human life and how these practices can encourage the more resilient – the more hopeful – human tomorrow. By helping you change the story you think you are in.

And so the creative marks you’re making.

1 new ways of seeing.

“ART IS OLD STUFF IN OLD BUILDINGS.”

2 personal testimony.

“ART IIS FOR KNOW-IT-ALL INTELLECTUALS.”

3 learning by doing.

“ART IS ALL SILLY DAYDREAMING.”

4 bringing to life.

“ART IS ABSTRACT AND DISTANT.”

5 finding yourself.

“ART IS FOR ALCOHOLICS.”

6 putting soul into production.

“ART HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH SALES FORECASTS.”

7 comfort with ambiguity.

“ART IS FOR THE WEAK.”

8 connected perspective.

“ART DOESN'T MAKE A DIFFERENCE.”

9 confidence in mark making.

“ART IS JUST ESCAPISM.”

INTRODUCTION: WHAT FEELS WRONG?

“We believe, contrary to the classic notion, that the impulses to create art, far from being the privilege of exceptional individuals, are in bountiful supply in any passer-by, but that they are usually held in check, adulterated or counterfeited, out of concern for social alignment, and in deference to recieved myths.”

Jean Dubuffet, 1901-1985, part of
the Outsider Art movement

Let you stop me right there.

“Change the world”?

..Sounds a bit infantile, doesn't it? As AY Young sings: “We can change the world – is that a lie they told us?”

Who wants this “change” – and why? You? Still dreaming of the neater, tidier tomorrow where rules can be fun?

Or are you wishing the bloody kids and the bloody liberals would stop banging on about changing anything? There are lines of common sense about the way the world works, no?

Plus – sorry? Change the world through *art*?

You have responsibilities. A team to lead. Clients to serve. Kids to feed. Grown-up stuff to be delivering.

Even if you're an ardent gallery botherer or music lover or theatre-goer or film critic or book devourer or poetry slammer or box-set binger or singer or maker or producer or performer or writer or director... *art?* Apart from being central to how we cope with everything between primal screaming in the park, this is hardly the time to be talking about art, is it. Isn't the world on fire? All the places it isn't flooding. Or fighting. Or shopping. Or queuing for a theme park ride.

Also, as one performance artist came straight up to me at an artists' convention and said, having delivered some pretty demanding one-person performance art themselves earlier and after I'd pitched the idea of this book about art to everyone:

"What about the wanky art?"

Before I'd even quite settled back in my seat in front of all those artists, I had suddenly realised there might be a whole companion book to this one exploring just how ridiculous and self-parodic and unaffecting "art" can *also* sometimes seem.

But I don't have the heart to write that one yet. Because it's not the one we need.

Perhaps you just have a sneaking suspicion that art is a bit like satire. It can feel jolly important while its happening, but what are the brutal metrics of the difference it reeeeeeally makes?

As I've heard it said: "We remember the protest songs and think they were important but really it was the direct action of the protestors that moved the dial."

Woah. Way to kill the whole buzz before we've even started, man.

But, as an artist myself, daring to tackle the whole topic of art's place in a time of crisis, I think there's a truth here worth starting at: If you're wanting to make a difference right now, there's no substitute for putting your body into the fray. It's old fashioned physical courage that gums up machines most noticeably, if system change is what you're looking for.

..And you *are* looking for system change, aren't you? You secret old utopian. If you're reading this? You want change.

You know something **feels** wrong.

About everything.

Is this the way into art you didn't know you've been waiting for?

I'd aside to camera 2 here, before we go any further and you rightly say it, who am I? Timo Peach?

Just some casual Insta lifestyle creative? What have I ever changed as an artist or a person writing this? My terribly eclectic music production outfit, Momo:tempo, is so niche you could still fit its brilliant audience in my very modest little house by the seaside, which at least once was an excellent party. But in raw numbers of influence – those comforting, terrible numbery numbers we're all addicted to – who am I to preach the power of world changing art?

I'd say I'm a pilgrim. Of art and of a better future.

Because if failing chumps like me can't encourage change, there aren't enough supersaints among us to do all the work – and nothing will change. Not like you “hope” it will. Just like I secretly do.

My point is that in times of distressing global upheaval, watching worlds reform, feeling pretty useless, *cynical resignation is not the whole truth.*

Just as my hypocrisy, laziness, incompleteness, terrible habits and basic ignorances aren't the whole story of me. Like you. Like all of us.

We yearn for something better. We just do.

What the hell is that?

I've come to believe that it's something inside as primal as any desire to club each other to death and nick each other's boyfriends. It's the need to make order from chaos.

We can't help wanting to resolve our expectations. To find confidence from fear. To find a sense of identity so strong it gives us purpose. To find beauty. A desire only highlighted by how ugly things so easily seem.

Because *what is the real context that change always happens in?* What fuels the direct action or the bedroom trolling?

Culture, baby.

A pervading idea of the world you are raised and braised in. A damn-fool picture of the world you see everything through, like a filter. A story you think you're in. To stand a hope of making enough sense of life that you even bother to get out of bed, never mind your bedroom.

The world in your head. Before you open the front door.

When the story you think you're in changes, that breaks things.

So what story do *you* think you are in. And can you change it?

This is what art is for.

Most especially if you are used to projecting practical leadership during the day. Your ability

to develop vision, articulate it and help people connect their efforts to it seems very essentially in need of some thinking like an artist. And never more so if you know you have to help everyone around you face change.

I'll share nine practices of art to help you feel more like you can re-write the story you think you're in, and why wrestling with it can be a significant part of understanding your human agency. Whether you're currently in charge of important sounding things or flying under the radar.

Perhaps too, to help you feel more like you're part of a bigger narrative in doing so – and not simply in a burning-bobsleigh-to-hell kinda way. It's time to get off that theme park ride, because we're not strapped in at all. And it's gathering speed.

So I'm going to get you *doing* some art also.

Take a breath. This will be alright.

Because it's likely not what you think it'll be.

..And alsosomeofwhatyouthinkit'llbe – 'kay – but from a new angle. And it WILL be alright.

This book is part cheery meditation on art's place in human life, part pithy reflection on what it's like to be living during the world's sixth mass extinction and part cheeky nudge into seeing your own creativity in a new way.

But before you jump on Artcetera's website and buy a complete set of gouache paints, let's simply turn to a new page.

Go on. >

I want you to get used to treating the physical version of this book like a sketchbook. Something I didn't enjoy at artschool but which I do all the time now across layout pads and journals. Get used to scribbling in the blank pages and across the text with your thoughts and notes. Records of ideas or even little artefacts during your time following this little pocket adventure.

It won't be marked by teacher, don't worry. Though you might find you want to share things from it at the end. You never know.

For fun, for interest, for switching us up out of the same ol' story we seem stuck in, I'm going to suggest nine ways you can think a bit more like an artist and change what you believe about your own creativity and what futures are possible for us dumb brilliant lot on Earth. I'm going to share some ideas about why ordinary un-arty-farty you can reclaim an aspect of your human heritage you may have not realised was yours.

Art.

NEW WAYS OF SEEING

“ART IS OLD STUFF IN
OLD BUILDINGS.”



Two men in black suits are standing in a gallery. An obviously *art* gallery. One of them is holding his chin thoughtfully, looking down at a collection of objects on the floor in front of them. The other is looking a bit perplexed.

“Yeees, I mean just look at that” says the first man, confidently.

“What is it?” says his friend, bemused.

“A remarkable use of colour and form there. It’s vibrant. It’s alive with meaning, isn’t it?”

“But what is it?”

The confident critic steps forward, peering.

“It’s obviously Addis” he says, confidently. “In his red period.”

As the two continue to contemplate, an elderly cleaner shuffles past them and places the matching group of items on her cleaning trolley. For they are a mop, bucket, swing bin and dustpan. By household plastics brand Addis.

I wish I could remember the punchline. I think it was quite good.

This advert from the 1980s was made at the height of Smith & Jones' fame on British telly, but despite it being nowhere on the internet for me to verify, it's left an impression on me because of a key truth it accidentally illustrated.

Spending time in an art space can make you start to see ordinary things a bit differently.

Art space is all in the mind.

When I asked writer, director and richly considerate space nerd Andy Robinson to make sense of my idea for putting the first artist on

Mars, he took me to a 40,000 year old cave in Southern France. At least, on the page.

His script for *The Martian Artist* took the whole idea of art back to its roots – the reason we make marks at all. Which isn't just about leaving them, to brighten up wherever we're living, but about believing they will be seen after we've left. That we will be seen. And seen in a certain way.

You may think you're keeping up with the kids as you curate your personal brand across your social platforms, but it's not such a new idea. Wanting to tell the story of you is part of what makes art primal. To ascribe meaning to your existence, leaving a deliberate message behind you; wanting to have "said something".

Funny buggers, aren't we? This is hardly helping us track the next vital meal on the great migration out of Africa, is it?

But there in the Pêche Merle caves of southern France, and found in sites across five continents,

are beautiful hand stencils and other detailed, deliberate marks left by women and men of our race who took time out from nursing and hunting and looking for soft leaves to make them. Back in that supposedly primitive era four times longer ago than the beginning of human civilisation as we know it, which now involves handy practical things like farming, written language and Tupperware.

And there on the page, leaving the cave, Andy's use of this historic reference resonates with emotional meaning as great today as ever those marks did in history. I could see it in the eyes of everyone I have described his key scene to, when pitching our creative project *The Shape of Things To Hum*.

They just felt it, even just described.

Echoes back to ourselves.

What makes you consider doing something

creative?

The time you spend on Insta, the pull to write down some thoughts, the craft you put into your look – what are you getting from it? How does it make you feel?

It's fair to say that creativity can foster many emotions. But I suspect too that both public projecting and private noodling often share a truth with the intent of making a time capsule – our marks aren't quite so much about speaking to the strangers we hope will find them. We're speaking to ourselves. And not only because you work on your own.

When we hear ourselves back, we hear more than the vibration of our voices through the air. When we look at the marks we've made, the poems we've written, the songs we've composed, the photos we've cropped, we see more than the everyday us. The ordinary, schelpping, bimbling, grumbling, worrying, us.

We see aspirations, hopes, values, maybe fears, failures and losses reflected back. We see some emotional evaluation of ourselves. Hoping it looks suddenly like a hit single us, edited from the the much less tidy, long-form, follow-through compositional us.

It may be ourselves that we're trying to see in everything, which is an interesting psychological need – but it has a funny effect. Seeing ourselves in our own creative marks can actually change us. But so can seeing ourselves in other people's.

This is why I've long banged on to artistic mates about finishing things. It's only when you've framed something, concluded it enough to no longer inhabit the process of it but stand back and receive it, that you can lay it down in front of you like a paving slab and step onto it. Learn from it and move forward. And also stand a hope of selling a few copies.

Being able to track your timeline back through

personally fashioned artefacts is one of the greatest privileges of making art, actually. It helps you get conscious of your journey as you go, as well as simply chronicling the weird, brilliant business of you being alive.

You *are* still alive, right?

An artefact of all life on Earth.

Undoubtedly the most audacious time capsule I know of was a tiny ship. A ship so fragile and primitive, it was yet expected to weather the most mind-bogglingly fearsome ocean, and to do so carrying a curation of all human creative expression.

I'm talking about the Voyager Probes' Gold Disks.

The face of this project is probably Carl Sagan, and he was blatant about its intentions. As the project's creative director and Carl's future wife

Anne Druyan and her team worked frantically to précis all of human civilisational worth and select the precisely right mix of musical works, languages, cultural sounds and animal voices for a gold-pressed record to be glued to the side of a 70s space probe and blasted beyond the Kuiper Belt into extra-solar space to represent all of life on Earth to intelligence rooted in another part of the cosmos that still had good taste enough to prefer vinyl, Sagan made clear the profound artistic purpose of “this gift across the cosmic ocean”.

Speaking about NASA’s earlier versions of these records on the Pioneer probes, he said:

“The greater significance... is not as a message to out there; it is as a message to back here.”

I believe NASA promised to “do some science” along the way through the solar system to justify the slightly expensive set up costs for this mobile expo. But while it sounds obvious to sensible ol’ you that convincing politicians and engineers

of the value of this sort of artsy stunt is hard, I wonder why.

If there’s an instinct in the human mind to make a mark on the universe as well as to try to make sense of the worlds within, surely we should have been sending poets and sculptures to the planets all the time?

Primal human firmware isn’t as simple as we imagine, however. You may like to blame your lizard brain for all manner of social faux pas and horrible things in your browser history, but none of those instincts of yours are happening in an ambient server room to a clock. They’re happening in competition with each other and environment and in the much more, well, fluid context of... culture.

The damn-fool ideas you get in your head.

And they get there by all the damn-fool things you spend time with.

Like it or not, you have creative instincts in there. But you and I are not always ready to do emotional business with ourselves. Other things can get in the way. Like, for example, doing the maths and practicing not throwing up in centrifuges and nailing all the procedures it takes to escape Earth's gravity and not die in a hundred different ways in space. If that's your job.

The safety of the space programme doesn't leave much time for designing micro-g installations. And neither does much else in our heavily engineered times.

I think we can get used to not practicing everything of us. Especially if there's no one else around us doing it.

But this doesn't mean that the need to make sense of things emotionally goes away with the memory of what to do about it. Our needs remain, man. Notably, the need to make order from chaos.

Yes. I am looking at you too here.

Chilling out helps us find the plot.

Now, you may well be used to the idea that art is a lot of historic old stuff in historic old museums. Even most of the new stuff. But the big names in the famous grand halls of the Uffizi or the Louvre or the Tate or the Met seem a long way from prehistoric hand marks, right?

Ten thousand years of remarkably stable – in other words *predictable* – climate patterns on Earth enabled a lot more art to flourish and be left behind for archeologists and museum owners to plunder. *Sorry!* – treasure. But after millennia of bitter nomadic winters and weather extremes, far below the pottery and mosaics in the geological strata beneath all our feet, the holocene era's plumbing and publishing encouraged some longer term pondering.

“Books are the way that the dead communicate

with us. The way that we learn lessons from those who are no longer with us” as Neil Gaiman puts it. But the human instinct for art is deeper than this slightly mystical practicality.

What we’ve needed to survive the unpredictable madness of being conscious is storytelling.

Screenwriter John York, in his book *Into The Woods*, describes how fundamentally evolutionary it is to humans to navigate the world through stories. Something within in us fundamentally wants to resolve emotional conflict, he suggests.

“All archetypal stories are journeys towards completion – voyages from darkness to light – and involve the reconciliation of opposites... Just as all stories seek to resolve order from chaos, humans seek to still the raging conflict within.”

That cultural maelstrom swirling around you like a digital hellmouth everyday online is ordinary farty

twerpy all of us trying to still that raging conflict within. The one fanned between our cultural expectations and personal experiences. Between the stories we’ve been *told* about ourselves and the ones we’ve actually walked the miles of.

There’s usually a big difference.

Storytelling is the backbone of human culture. An unquantifiably rich ether of emotional connection the communal, empathetic human animal lives in everywhere, culture is really what binds your universe together. And when you boil down all your references, idioms, artefacts and beliefs, you could easily be understood by any space alien, turning up with a Gold Record under one of their arms brandishing a pen and asking for your autograph, to be living in a story. A narrative *you think you are* in that helps makes some working sense of what the hell you’re doing with your life.

And if they turned up today and not two hundred years ago, that space alien might say you were also suffering from Leading Character syndrome.

You fretting old post-modernist, you.

But if this has any psychological truth to it, there's a practical effect: The story you think you are in will shape the character you play. And so the actions you take.

You may not think of it this way, but psychology researchers MacAdams and McClain suggest that we all construct a Narrative Identity.

“Narrative Identity is a person's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past *and imagined future* to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose.”

Which has another implication you might not have thought about before: *The past isn't inevitably pushing you towards a particular future.*

There's that word: *Future*. It's implications are personal, which is why you are thinking about it. Or trying not to.

As Benjamin Hardy says: “Your past isn't the thing “causing” you to be who you are. Actually, who you are right now, and how you see the world right now, is *determining the meaning of the past.*”

You are, in other words, prone to re-editing your history, the way you see where you've come from, to fit where you think you are now. You're inevitably trying to make some sense of the formative experiences that slammed into the young you. Experiences still inside you but seen from where you are now. Which means, as Hardy says: “Your story is your responsibility.”

And where it goes.

Your future is not inevitable. Not until your car's wheels have actually left the cliff edge road, anyway.

There is, while you're still pondering this, more to the idea than a light bit of anti-predeterminism. Or D&D role play.

Not least of which is the simple observation that you aren't in only one story. Just as there isn't one human future but billions, none of us are in a monoculture. Whatever your skin colour or cultural blinkers.

We're all navigating and assimilating and conflating multiple cultures at once. In the age of globalisation, millions of us can be described as poly-cultural – jumping between local languages and international ones every day. Because it's a richly natural thing for us to do.

We were, I've long thought, always going to end up here. Clicking on Pandora's NFT.

Narrative choice.

It's become my own conviction that there is something in our most widely shared story that is giving us trouble. Giving us, arguably, all the main troubles. And it is that beastly, globalisation. Because the story it's told all of us we're in has

convinced us it was the only true story in town about the big stuff. The what we value stuff. And how we should see all that.

Have you thought much about “how you see” the world?

You're definitely a bit of a philosopher. Not just because all your mates ask you to stop asking awkward questions but because, essentially, all of us are built to think about things. Yet, you may not have explored how you see things through art. That's what art is for – to really get inside all that.

John Berger coined the phrase *Ways Of Seeing*, in his four-part BBC television series and subsequent book in 1972. In looking at the great European Tradition of painting and so many of those big art names in grand halls, he began the whole series by walking up to Botticelli's Mars and Venus and Stanley-knifing a chunk out of it. Or rather, Stanley-knifing a chunk out of a reproduction of it, to make his opening point.

“In this programme, it is not so much the paintings themselves I want to consider but the way we now we see them” he said. “Because we see these paintings as nobody saw them before. If we discover why this is so, we shall also discover something about ourselves and the situation we are living in.”

James Bridle rekindled the phrase with his four-part BBC radio series *New Ways Of Seeing* in 2020, reimagining Berger’s work for the digital age, looking at the hidden networks and structures underneath the internet.

It is a headline idea that’s become the key way that I see art for myself these days – that its most “useful” role evolutionarily is giving us new ways of seeing things. Our dumb selves, really. And my own reference to this with a mop and bucket ad and two old comedians is no less high brow.

I have long delighted in walking out of an hour in a classic white-cube gallery and looking at

everything as though it could be art.

“What does this bin mean?” “Is that bench art?” “That bloke’s an installation, right?”

I kind of want to make us all walk through a gallery of pieces reflecting our world as it is right now.

Published not long after I was born, the book *Ways Of Seeing* seems a strikingly relevant read half a century later. A kind of sacred text to many students in the 70s, I’m sure, I recall my tutors banging on about it and its themes a lot even in the early 90s.

I obviously paid it no attention whatsoever when I was at art school.

If I handed you a copy, you’d say it was as typical an arty philosophy book as you would expect. It has quite a formal, academic tone to it by today’s ;oD standards and it’s all set in Eurostyle bold, which is exactly the sort of

slightly illegible style point I would have made back then. Though I'm not sure that's why my final year thesis on *Star Trek* pulled down my overall degree mark as a graphic designer.

Since I am now firmly at a stage where I wish to be caught reading exactly such books in public coffee spots, I can pass on to you that Berger's whole point with *Ways Of Seeing* seems to be an economic one. Namely: ownership.

The way we've all been brought up to see the world is through the eyes of property.

Icons of status.

Your school trip to the National Gallery was always likely to be Death By Old Crap. Assuming it wasn't actual death by sleepy coach driver all the way down to London. If you were luckier and it was a trip to Tate Modern, the funky re-interpreted industrial space might have seemed

more fun, but the art in there is the weirder stuff and you might still not have been ready for half a cow and a wall of paint trickles. I wouldn't have been.

Plus, if you were being shown around the apparent essentials of modern art, with painters and photographers and designers and performers and craftspeople deconstructing the great European Traditions while trying to deal with the horrors of mechanised war, fascism and conformity – while mostly ignoring the conformity of sexism – it would have been weird AND old.

This was not for me. In a way, all art.

But as I've slowly done the basic basics of approximating some adulthood, with a passing interest in the world around me, I've come to see how much the Impressionists like Monet or Morisot and the Cubists like Picasso or Popova and the Surrealists like Dali or or Kahlo or Man Ray have been reflecting how humans were seeing the changing world around them at

different times.

And who has been curating and writing the histories of art we've all grown up with in the background, depending on which names we all recognise there.

John Berger wanted to show that the “great” European Tradition of painting was a massive reflection of the imperial European way of seeing – the way of seeing that has shaped the modern world with all its problems us poor saps are finally having to deal with.

All those paintings of rich blokes from Florence. They're not just about showing off all they could afford to collect. They betrayed a perspective on the whole world: It was property waiting to be plundered.

The structure of those compositions in oil paint between loosely 1500 and 1900, as he sees it, portrayed animals, women, outsiders and artefacts as items of ownership – placing you the

viewer as the owner. Not surprisingly because it was the rich blokes who were paying the skilled painters to paint the world from their perspective and who would be looking at those paintings the most afterwards. But they were also performing quite an artistic mind trick.

They were placing you in their shoes. Even when looking at portraits of them. They were holding up their own mirror on the world, framed and positioned exactly as they wanted it to be, for you to see.

Imagine being me.

You so want to be me.

And this has a direct lineage to consumerism and advertising.

Imagine being this guy.

Imagine being this mighty woman.

The tradition of the European nude in painting is not sacred Proper Art, Berger suggests, it's exactly what you think it is if you're not being told otherwise by a very traditional art historian.

Maybe you're not imagining it. That nude woman on the canvas is looking at you to evoke a key feeling in you: That you own her.

Bit like a porn star does.

Not naked, nude. Not in candid beauty but arranged for the frame. This was Berger's assertion as evidence for the way we've told ourselves the story of privilege and power, and how it gets into all our heads, seeing it retold enough.

Female bodies, brown bodies, animal bodies, grand buildings and symbols of technology or skill alike – art like you expect it to be still is all a certain economic culture.

Female artists, black artists, non-European views

of the world through art were all weirdly missing when I was growing up. Fighting to be re-inserted into the story of human experience and expression even today.

But if it is a very old system of seeing, then it's one that infects all of us, even those of us so affected by the system we can feel it cut us in a thousand little ways every day, as we can't help but live against its grain.

Your sponsored Insta life is meant to make you envy yourself.

“The spectator-buyer is meant to envy herself as she will become if she buys the product” says Berger. “The publicity image steals the love of herself as she is and offers it back to her for the price of the product.”

You being the product.

Suffering for your art.

When you think of artists, is the image in your mind still as someone “struggling”.

Does art seem very underfunded and not very attractive as a result? Despite all the fortunes mystifyingly made in the “art market”?

Maybe this is partly because the artist really would have been struggling in painterly times – not simply to put food on the table if they wouldn’t paint what the rich landowner wanted, but with their conscience – to use creative skill and curiosity and honest testimony to challenge the way we see the world, and it’s power structures.

Not reinforce the prevailing narrative.

The sort of irony of that period so left with us today underneath the storytelling of globalisation is that painting brought things to life. So all those rich dudes had to act imperious like ancient world leaders, stern and aloof, while the technical

reality of oil paint rendered them more human.

What an effort it is to be taken seriously. It is a problem visible in the power structures of today. Including the ones trying to help our current problems.

Power structures seem far away and immovable. The fallout of their failure hits very close to home.

How to put food on the table and heat our homes even basically, never mind environmentally. How to find mental health support dealing with it all, when mental health is so chronically underfunded in public life.

We are used to thinking of art as fanciful in the face of such sufferings.

Yet, is something in you itching, even aching, for something to hope in? And something to do to make sense of our tumultuous times? Do more than keep hiding?

I will bring you right back down to your kitchen table with something to do, in a moment. But before we do that, I want us to take one last swoop up to a higher perspective in this chapter – right back up into orbit for a particular global view.

Take a breath.

Logos of disaster.

You are reading this in what could be described as an age of collapse.

A slow motion disaster we've nihilistically scrunched our way through with popcorn in a dozen different end of days movies, but a seizing up of old systems and expectations and a leeching out of undelt-with injustices. Like, mahoosive ones no one can afford.

Interesting how the story around us has changed to tell us this in more recent years. Tell us this

alongside all the usual logo-marked expectations and instructions for living.

If we were to imagine an expo of current human planet horrors, there is a framework that might be a useful structure to fill in with all the art. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Heard of 'em?

No, wake up – this is pertinent.

They're being increasingly referenced by businesses and changemakers after some years of being loosely chugged about by NGOs and those in the know. And I think it's fair to say that this cheery looking impossible To Do list for the world is probably the best working analysis we have of just how f***ed we are.

The more of us that measure ourselves by the same metrics of f***edness, the more we can agree by what degrees at least, we are indeed all f***ed. Which seems in some way helpful.

I think they would be much more helpful if they filled in the Goal that is missing. The Goal that will in fact activate all the others.

Yes, you're ahead of me. It's art.

Walk with me.

I think the SDGs *are* well thought through analytical structure of the interlocking problems facing the 21st century, and a helpful framework to help any of us co-reference and contextualise our own efforts to confront them. But I think the UN reflects the leadership of the world it's trying to help – it's technocratic and creatively illiterate.

It's been talking about its own good plan all wrong. Just when we all could do with knowing what the hell the plan is to deal with everything.

As I spent time reading around the SDGs for the first time. as a lay person and dumb creative, it struck me that the most useful thing about them is not how they break down the human planet

problems, labelling up the work to be done like Georgian and Victorian scientists deciding how to carve up the different expressions of nature into things they could write on bell jars.

The power of the Global Goals is how they put it all together.

Spend time with the aims of Life Below Water and Life On Land and Energy and Food and Gender Equality and, oh, *all of it* – and it dawns on you they are all connected. Every Goal is, in fact, a different symptom of the same single thing.

The economic story we think we're in.

The way we value absolutely everything in the globalised world. The shared language of capitalism, as we're all used to speaking it.

Our valuation – say it with me: – *culture*.

The story we think we're in has been killing us.

Which may not be a revelation to you, because you are a clever sausage and also lots of people have been banging this drum loudly since I first came down from Hengistbury Head with my face aglow with blue light clutching the tablet of *Unsee The Future's* foundational episodes.

But we have been doing a lot of diagnosing, UN and NGOs and changemakers and futurism podcasters alike. What we haven't been doing is imagining alternatives to the economic futures we think are inevitable and we all don't really want to think about.

We haven't been creating experiences that dare to bring alive completely different human tomorrows.

By this reckoning, there is nothing we need more right now than art. The ability to create new ways of seeing the worlds we're in, or could be in.

And feeling the truth of them.

PRACTICING THE HOPEY CHANGEY BIT: Scribble the world you really want.

I don't know if you've seen some wallpaper you really love. Maybe you've hung some in the past and are still quite proud of the last two lengths you put up. The point is, do you have any left over in a cupboard?

Go get it.

And a stick of charcoal.

We'll come back to the stick of charcoal. Go get the wallpaper.

I don't know if you're used to making marks. And if so, is it writing or doodling? If grasping a mark implement isn't for you, I wonder if there's

another physical way for you to approach this exercise none the less, that doesn't involve a screen. Have a think.

Because I want to start your playful experimentation with thinking like an artist by getting you to shake off some old habits. Some old perspectives, and some old tools.

I want you to think about the future, by making marks like an early human.

Early humans didn't have limited edition flocked wallpaper from the V&A shop, no, but you're probably not going to have the heart to turn that over and get it grubby anyway, so use something easy and physically a bit too big to be casual.

If you've managed to source some charcoal, full marks. You don't have to scare yourself by going to the local art supplies place, walking into a forest of paint tubes, pencils and pads and shouting in your head: "I WAS LIED TO; THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT I THOUGHT ART WOULD BE"

– I think it would be most cool to coyly ask an art mate of yours if they'll give you some.

I want you to do some solarpunk visioning.

What world do you really want to see ahead of you?

Write it, draw it, list it, diagram it – all, ideally, in very mucky charcoal; get the future all over your fingers.

Don't problem solve this. Say what you want, straight – no couching it for others' ears. Tell your fears and hurts to stand in the corner for twenty minutes – they have no jurisdiction here either.

What do you wish for, for your future? And go big – what do you wish the world to look like?

Still, don't problem solve how we get there, just make an image, a word cloud, a series of passionate mad marks of feeling, that reflect what you privately want put right with the world –

with all sense of cynicism and supposed naivete banished. Just for twenty minutes.

Like a child, before all that happened happened, what do you want the future to look like? Sound like. *Feel* like?

And here is an important last art tip: Don't try to get round the whole gallery, zoom straight into what grabs your eye and spend time there. What, in other words, stokes your passion?

Follow that.

Now, I'll say you can of course do this in other ways – it's the thinking that's important. But as we'll come to later, physical experience really unlocks thinking.

So you can do this with scissors and glue and old copies of Vogue; there is a rich tradition of collage in art, especially modern makers mid last century.

Make a vision board. Not just on Pinterest.

I confess I always found collage kinda creepy, but it says much about the world it was made in, forming reactions to a crowded media age by hacking out bits and pieces and sticking them together like flotsam, to juxtapose a statement from what you select. It's uncomfortable and untidy and this can be helpful to stuck thinking.

But getting glue on your hands is important somehow. Like charcoal. Like paint. Like wind in your face.

Because this is about being alive.

How do you wish you could be alive?

Let's pause.

..Now look at it.

A bit crap?

Course it is. You've not done this before, or in ages.

Or maybe it's not as crap as you thought?

Whatever you made and feel, put it to one side and make sure you keep it for the end or I'll be cross.

PERSONAL TESTIMONY

"ART IS JUST FOR KNOW-IT-
ALL INTELLECTUALS."

"It would be great if you knew you could, wouldn't it?"

My editor had appeared at my desk.

"What?" I looked up from my 1.2 tonne CRT monitor.

"Y'know... I mean, you never *would*, of course" he continued, looking after someone who wasn't there as if they'd just left his office.

"Of course," I replied. "Never would what?"

He pulled in a fist at his side and gave it a little shake, still looking far away.

"Lamp them –" he spun to me "– I mean you never *would*" he glinted, barely a smirk. "Of *course*. Would never need to. Persuasion of

intellect always, naturally.”

He looked away again with a wistful re-grip of his fist, barely raised.

“But just to know that you c o u l d...”

He paused, holding the thought. Then turned to me again.

“Y’know?”

“Why are you looking at me?” I said, a hint of offence creeping into me late.

“Oh you’re no fun,” he muttered, turning back to his office as though he’d brought me into an ongoing train of thought for only a glimpsed moment and his office door closed again.

My editor at the time I found quickly amusing. Alas, he knew it. He could defuse and wrong-foot me in a second with a quip, should I apparently need it because he had done something

disorganised and annoying; I can defend myself against anything except temptation, very minor difficulties and a quick wit.

I was in this department, pushing very unartistic looking magazine layouts across my 1.2 tonne CRT monitor and trying not to laugh at my editor periodically, distracted again while he made good his escape from organisational culpability, because I was working on a very specialist periodical to pay the creative bills. A niche corner of publishing that had been appearing on WHSmith’s newstands every month since just before I was born and which should have defined the idea of calm waters.

A literary space where words were not for fighting with, but for imparting geeky and possibly life saving wisdoms.

I speak of the gentle world of *Practical Boat Owner*. A place where boats spent a lot of time out of the water being sanded and restrained and antifouled and having cleats cunningly re-

attached to failing glass fibre and where knots were forever re-explained and sea anchor deployment discussed in the cockpit from the stability of the sailing club quayside up on blocks. A world where circumnavigation was always dreamed about as the ultimate implication of ancient sailing liberty but where a thousand cunning little fixes would keep a little boat afloat in the Solent or the Sargasso Sea alike and where expensive plotters and GPSs were tested but everyone knows there was no avoiding the chart table and tide times book.

And so naturally every reader of *PBO* was an unshakeably opinionated bugger.

It wasn't explicit in the title's heavy, perfect bound pages. Stories were told and beautifully illustrated, gear was photographed, elaborate pontoon manoeuvres were explained and, while skippers caps were undoubtedly worn while expansively penning such insights, nothing about the magazine's editorial tone was set up to be combative. It was a specialist title, there to

indulge and encourage the specialist. How lovely. And helpful.

But if you ever got one of them on the blower, expect certainties about life at length.

Life at sea does demand certainty of leadership, after all; ambiguity risks lives, out in the swell.

My editor then was not like this. For one thing, it was oft muttered that he hadn't set foot on the water since somewhere around 1970. But around his intellectual curiosity he, I suspect, operated under a similar instinct to me, guided significantly by personal amusement and a certain charming expediency.

Not unlike a series of sketches from a British comedy show of the same 90s era I was working on the magazine, *Big Train*, in which irate office workers persistently re-approach their boss to complain about pay and conditions, which he responds to with soothing empathy and immediate distractions of puppies and juggling

and card tricks, before dipping out to catch a taxi.

This was my editor all over. And he could sense I related to it, I think. I have felt myself wondering if I am slightly turning into him as I've gotten older. I have long had the beard. A clever bloke with a carefully deployed bit of sparkle about him, he wasn't also endowed with a rugby centre-forward's build, shall we say.

I can't say I have been, either. But twenty years after I left *PBO*'s un-artistic sounding stability in my ignominious creative career, my subsequent Momo years have coincided with a global era of simmering uncertainties flashing into flame and buffeting waves everywhere. A digitally networking time requiring the absolute conviction of a *PBO* reader but without any of their experience at sea and deployed with the brutal attack force of a rugby centre forward. One who's been revisiting *Game Of Thrones*.

Fiefdoms and revolutions.

Opinions. Shouting. Fighting. War in Europe.

What a time to be alive, eh?

I'm tempted to say that artists are fighters. In some way, always. The most famous of them were at least frontiers people, innovating a way of seeing, a style, a cultural perspective. Which usually involved pissing off or being laughed off by the cultural establishment of their time. To such degree that I wonder what revolutionary voices might still be missing from our collective art schooling in the West.

Do you consider yourself a bit of a rebel?

I'm far too balanced and comfortable to be much of a revolutionary myself. But that doesn't mean I'm not artistic. Nor you, if you believe you are a sensibly balanced person and don't qualify.

Despite throwing charcoal around in our first

exercise in chapter one, you might simply have felt all your life that “art” isn’t for you.

But if I ask you what truth you most care about, all people pleasing deactivated, I’d expect you to be speaking from a singular passionate point of view for a moment there. A bit lit up. A little less tied down in the way you speak.

So what would it become if you wrote it down? That passion?

And how might you instinctively want to write it?

A lot of artists liked to go so far as to write very considered manifestos around what they care about. Lord knows I’ve long wanted to start an articulate movement from a coffee shop with jolly intellectual mates, and I like the idea that one notorious expo and a good hand-printed pamphlet might do it. But a long essay isn’t the point, and neither is the ambition to revolt.

Whether wildly or reflectively expressed, what art does is simply testify to a truth. Give *articulation* to it, that might have otherwise stayed hidden.

The deal is that emotional truth resonates. So it can always cause trouble.

When composer David Page, one of the three founding brothers of indigenous Sydney dance company Bangarra was asked in a documentary: “Do you feel pressure to bring political messages into your work”, he replied:

“I don’t think you can escape politics. Here, look –” and pointed to the skin tone of his hands with a shrug.

Artistic movement makers, as we look back and identify them, were sometimes conscious warriors for a new truth they felt they had to wrestle with, testify to. Jessica Lack has published a book of 100 artist manifestos from around the world, noting in her introduction

to *Why are we artists?* that such passionate publications of intent are not just the historic preserve of “those scabrous radicals the Futurists” a hundred years ago in Italy, a group of fiery intellectuals who come to mind readily in many European histories of art. In fact, of course, all over the place across the last century until now creative voices on every continent have declared artistic intentions in defiance of a status quo.

So, obviously, many artists know they’re risking their lives by speaking out, or living out. It’s a popular idea amongst creatives that totalitarians come for the artists first. Though I’m not sure what comfort it might be when led off into an unmarked van that your work has finally found an audience.

Ukrainian artist Serhii Zakharov didn’t quite imagine this, however. He was detained and tortured for six weeks after deploying street art to mock pro-Russian fighters who’d occupied his native Donetsk back in 2014. He developed

quite guerilla tactics to beat curfew and put up the works, he and others feeling that the creative expression of resistance was vital – but he thought the occupation would have bigger fish to fry than him.

“Who was going to come after an artist?” he said. “I was wrong about that.”

As well as testifying to his experiences through graphic works and exhibitions for artists to acknowledge events in the occupied parts of Ukraine, he later turned them into therapeutic art for others dealing with similar traumas. Work that seems explicitly relevant still as I write this in early 2022.

So art can, for sure, be a way to try to reshape divisive or even violent times into a different future with some vision. Visions of futures beyond suffering or with some truths better represented.

Courageous work because, let’s face it, nothing

says committing to your truth like giving your life.

But even asking too many questions in unexceptional times can go too far; think of it as the Aristotle school of martyrdom. Some of us are just born to make trouble.

But, just like hemlock latte philosopher himself, whatever the political climate, art's spark is really *curiosity*:

What if this? What if this were true? What if I were here, representing this alternative to the way things are?

What if you felt what I feel?

The hardest thing to ideologically argue with is perhaps personal testimony. "Lived experience." What the artistic impulse does is put raw passion to work creating a *new* experience, to bring it alive for *others*.

And in an odd way, I think of art as generally

more PBO than PLO – its more an invitation to help fix things than blow things up.

How do you feel about the idea of doing this yourself?

Is this when you imagine art definitely isn't for you – sticking your neck out to make a disruptive point? Or are there ways you can imagine expressing your truth, to ensure it is stood up for? And what do you think you do have to stand up for?

I would say that, whatever the urgency of your circumstances, art's cultural combat isn't usually to simply rant, even if it's raggedly, passionately or illegally made. It is to transport, bring alive, emotionally connect the passer-by, the outside world. An artistic instinct is to do some creative interpretation before engaging the world with what you care about.

Though it's obviously a lot quicker to just call Talk Radio.

Movements, tribes and armies.

Recently I watched a clip of a Sky News reporter being toured around a billionaire prepper's bunker. Someone getting practically ready for everything to go to hell. The reporter put it cheerily simply in his newsy voice-over:

“There certainly is no shortage of Americans scared about the future.”

The billionaire doing the showing wouldn't let him film in his arsenal room.

Now, when it comes to staring dumbly out at the news it's not like you haven't found yourself quietly wondering how you might live at least a bit more off-grid, is it? If only art brought in enough royalties to spend more time in your roof garden. Avoid all the noise and fighty shouting.

Trying to talk with someone on the supposed *other side* – which, as the zombilyse billionaires appear to be very clearly prepping

for, could be anyone – feels like shouting into a void. When that is the way your meeting and talking has been framed – as a zero-sum combat manoeuvre. It can feel like a maelstrom of preaching with nobody hearing.

Race, gender, political ideas – Twitter can seem a bin of the worst of us. If you are a woman, do you pull on fatigues and a fish knife before posting an opinion on it these days? If only it were just mansplaning you get back. Our shared digital culture has normalised the darkest personal threats. Normalised them. Nuance and debate are, it can feel, dead.

James O'Brien has seen a bit of cultural combat. A phone-in host on Talk Radio in London, he was firmly in the eye of the storm during the UK's chilling and bizarre seeming eruption of global polarisation, Brexit. But as a combative Fleet Street hack, he always considered himself rather good in a fight, able to turn a caller's emotive assumptions on their ear and knock them off balance with the implications of what they were

really saying.

In his book, *How not to be wrong*, he makes an alarming observation from his years of comparing heated debates and jousting with idealogues for a living.

“The very concept of objective truth is under seige” he says.

Under seige. Bunkering in.

Are we currently living in a culture: “in which empathy is increasingly denegated and devalued”?

James O’Brien observes coldly the idea of blind tribalism – the “footballification” of discourse.

“It’s a situation that terrifies me, and makes me worry for my children’s future” he says baldly. “Best summed up by an English caller, married to an Indian woman, who explained to me that he knew his political hero was a liar, a racist

and a fraud but that he offered him full-throated support, that he actively enjoyed being lied to ‘because it upsets people like you’.”

What do we do with that? I feel like I’m wearing concrete boots when I think about engaging with such comments.

As Russel Brand put it, half laughing while picking over the absurdly disfunctional pride of the billionaire bunker tour, “This is capitalism’s end game, innit – in the end, we’ll all be underground. You guys can stay up’ere picking through the bones and radioactive dust!”

If you were older you might be tempted to blame gaming for all the verbal violence in ordinary life today. As your nan has said often, “It all went sideways after *Tokyo Drift*.”

But then, she’s always been a wag, your nan.

It is likely has more to do with the gamification of our mass storytelling. Clickbating and reward

centres. All of which might seem to be about especially new, digital, “networked humanity” problems and platforms, but is driven by some pretty old fashioned media narratives.

So much so, I think that *Game Of Thrones* is no insignificant shared reference for us. It carries with it an implication that seems instructive to me – namely, that the old mass media story structures stoke the *feeling* that we’re really still living under fiefdom.

Surrounded by the threat of dragons and invasions.

Strip it away, the only real strength in this world is the capacity for violence. The only real belonging is fieltly to a lordly one, a power wielder, and their party line. The only real certainty is the definition of your enemies, and the idea of the clear sidgils they march under against you. The only real emotion is anger.

It’s all so sweetly comforting, isn’t it?

What a nice, simple war zone we all live in, according to this. What a tellable... *sellable* story to believe you are in. Especially when you’re already feeling frustrated.

In this, change seems laughably quaint an idea, right?

“Those who don’t believe in the law of the jungle are not just deluding themselves but are putting their very existence at risk – they will not survive long” as Yuval Noah Harari paraphrases.

Ah, “realism.”

For God and country’s sake just don’t consider the reality of trauma.

Strikers and singers.

What we forget in the tribal shoutyverse is that there are things that resonante between us.

Things that humans seem to pick up like radio transceivers, no matter where they're from.

Emotional truths, and shared experiences.

When division seems entrenched, art can walk into the middle of no-man's land and sing.

Something football likes a bit of.

Arsenal and England footballer Ian Wright is seen as a bit of a legend in the UK. Always seemed like a bloke who could manage anything with a big presence and a great smile you probably didn't want to get on the wrong side of. A great laugh, who could also handle himself.

But in talking to James O'Brien after a heart-rendingly honest appearance on the unblinkingly quaint Radio 4 cultural cornerstone *Desert Island Disks*, Ian Wright summed up a problem lurking in our society everywhere. A problem that inevitable-seeming gang culture and political private school alike just don't equip you for.

The inescapable emotional effect of trauma.

"I didn't want to be that guy that when I looked at myself in the mirror I didn't like myself."

You can brazen out your scars like defence all you like, that shiz will leak out, and you will have to deal with it.

O'Brien describes growing his own Survival Personality. If you grew up with some brutality at home or school or in the system you interacted with every day with barbs, because of your economics or skin or gender or because of anything at all outside your control, you will have grown a defence mech of some kind to survive it. But that you will have to recognise at some point, if you're to make reconcile that raging conflict within of yours. Can you feel it squirming now?

"The realisation that despite outward 'success'" says O'Brien, "you have become someone you neither want nor need to be is so incredibly liberating, it's hard to put into words."

He, like, Wright, eventually went to find therapeutic help – and it cracked him open into a whole new way of seeing himself and life.

There are creative experiences involved with psychotherapy, I think – role play and writing for sure – but in our binified, combative, GTA/GoT world, it's my conviction that art can cut through the years of putting off dealing with your trauma and connect you and me straight to the bit of us both that longs to feel more whole.

Art, I believe, can jump you right into moments of truth. Which can feel like healing.

Changing the experience.

Chile is a country with some experience of dictatorship. Seventeen years of rule by August Pinochet has left its mark on Chileans' shared consciousness and a couple of years into billionaire Sebastian Pinera's second elected

presidency, in 2019, frustrations erupted onto the streets.

From the spark of metro price rises in Santiago grew demonstrations and anger against all kinds of reforms the people said they were fed up with waiting for, across healthcare and education. A million people spilled onto the city's streets and they called for nothing less than a new constitution.

Pinera invoked laws created by Pinochet to declare a state of emergency, and imposed a state curfew.

That evening, through the eerily silent streets of Chile's capital, as people sat bunkered into their apartments, a sound quietly carried between the tower blocks. As it grew in people's attention and more windows were opened, people became transfixed. It was a solitary voice. Singing.

Opera singer Ayleen Jovita del Carmen Romero Zavala was standing at her own window, high

over the streets, surrounded by other yellow squares of people's lives in neighbouring blocks. She was singing *El Derecho de Vivir en Paz* – The Right to Live in Peace, by Victor Jara.

Even just typing these words, I am having to pause, to gather myself.

And I have never been to Chile. Don't know Victor Jara's song, and only read subsequently that he had written the song under Pinochet's rule in the 1970s, and had his guitarist fingers symbolically broken in the custody of the regime, for daring to share such empowering words and music. Yet still, every time I watch the film of Ayleen declaring beautiful, artistic defiance from her kitchen, note the wrapt silence between the canyons of Santiago's highrises and here pots and pans erupt into life with cheers as she finished, echoing around the city, I am in bits.

Art's testimony there didn't just fortify those with immediate solidarity, it speaks beyond a circumstance to the human spirit. Something in

us that calls to a beyond.

President Sebastian Pinera ended the curfew a few days later. But it would take a pandemic to defeat him in the polls and stay until the end of his term in 2021. But the country's new assembly is, as I write, preparing to draft a whole new constitution to define Chile's future.

Also, interestingly, as Pinera's right-wing base collapsed, in his last – lengthy – address as president in July of 2021, he made a surprise announcement. To fast track the enshrining of same sex marriage into Chilean law.

"I believe we must take an in-depth look at the value of freedom, including the freedom to love and form a family with a loved one." he said.

The protesters had to put themselves on the streets together. But they needed emotional fuel to do more than throw things. They needed to feel another world was possible, when all seemed impossible.

Authenticity not credibility

I am distracted from time to time with concerns over credibility. Don't throw too much shade at such surface-seeming insecurity, it seems central to selling music – people can smell whether something is or not. Credible. To its own aims.

Credibility between people isn't about fancy façades though, of style or intellect – quite the opposite. It's about authenticity.

A spectacular performance is a stunt we all want to see in the theatre, but partly because it will have the authenticity of practice. Work. And a crafted personal style across your brand will only connect you to true super fans if it expresses some realness in you. An authentic personal root.

We want artists to cast us spells of experience, but they won't work if they're not cast from truth.

Iranian-dutch artist Sevdaliza says she recognises that: "The artist is often referred

to as a magician. But her art," she says, "only lays bare the heightened capacity to channel universal truths."

She herself might be a multi-disciplined creator and artistic influencer with dazzling production values articulating her ideas. But she gets that the real power of art has nothing to do with budgets and reach.

"The authenticity in a painting or a piece of music is felt universally, because it resonates with the same essential being in the creator and the creation. The common story of life, love and death is what connects us humans. Art is important because it functions as a holistic portal to a deeper understanding of humans and the self."

When you share something from your experience and, really, your *vulnerability*, the rest of us are likely to just get it. Feel it with you.

As grand sculptor and experience creator Olafur

Eliasson puts it:

“Art helps us identify with one another and expands our notion of we – from the local to the global. .. This transformative experience is what art is constantly seeking.”

Rael San Fratello’s *Teeter Totter Wall* brings it alive very simply.

Bright pink see-saws through the Mexican-US border fence.

Defiantly simple play, breaking borders with joy.

In her essay *You are welcome*, writing in the summer of 2016, Olivia Laing describes trying to process her rising anxiety at dark societal signals all around her. But what kept coming to mind was an image of John Berger. Mr *Ways of seeing* himself.

An old man of 89 by this time, he was speaking at the British Library and someone in the

audience asked him how artists should respond to refugee crises. Tugging his beard for some time he responded eventually:

“With hospitality.”

Laing then describes two other experiences.

She firstly recalls Sarah Wood’s short *Boat people*, which takes a sweeping historic look at immigration, describing it as: “a re-humanising spell”. She quotes a woman from the film, living in exile, who experienced a momentary break in the usual silent distances between her and the foreign locals she lives amongst.

“This contact between strangers, for a moment, feels like coming home.”

Laing says this triggered a sense of light.

She then describes when she’d previously felt such a feeling. At Marc Hundley’s exhibition *New music*, in a Lower East Side gallery in Manhattan.

She says: “His work is about a kind of hospitality to feeling, a tolerance and openness that feels radical in its own right.”

Surrounded by his images, lingering in the space, looking at the faces and places depicted, she then noticed something else.

“Do you know what else was in the room? A hand-made bench. Sit down, you look tired. Whatever else might happen, I want you to know you’re welcome here. That you’re always welcome beside me.”

PRACTICING THE HOPEY CHANGEY BIT: Attend a poetry night.

You might think that applying this one will be about getting activisty. After all, as Jay Springett said to me, “We’re all supposed to be actors”. But I’m not going to get you making protest placards and I’m not sure I’d advocate getting creative in another Twitter comments thread; the results wouldn’t likely prove my point.

If you’re conscious of Insta burnout or Tiktok addiction, however, the art practice I am going to suggest might help you regain your bearings. And find your voice. To begin with, simply by hearing others.

The real point about personal testimony as a principle of art is to do with truth – sing from your own and it will cut through to the empathic fellow humans listening.

Don't waste time justifying yourself.

Stand up and simply say you are here, occasionally. You might enjoy hearing from you.

So I'm not going to keep you piddling about in the shallow end of art, its total immersion time already – poetry nights.

Yep, we are literally going there. Well, you are.

If you've not grown any kind of art carpace yet and still have baby-soft sensitive skin to arty-farty guff, you're going to just LOVE telling your best football pals you're off to poetry night. It might make your teeth itch like someone else's on a blackboard for the first half hour but the point of a weekly local poetry night is inclusion and safety – which means any joker is encouraged to get up and “share”...

Now. Take a breath.

I'm actually not going to suggest you drop your

name into the open mic hat at first. The point of this exercise is to move yourself to somewhere you've not been before, with people you don't normally hang with, and just get used to listening.

To the unevenness of the confidence in the voices, the styles, the talent. How awkward all that testimony can feel. But soak it up, dude. What you're listening to is hearts, and their need to connect to yours. If only for an experiential moment.

Picture your voice, as you hear their's.

If you've not had reason to stand out socially before, doing so can help you finally understand the power fizzing through the boldly showbiz triumph of Gloria Gaynor's *I am what I am*.

Some experiences in life might force you through an experience that ends with you resurrecting in the rain as this disco classic's chorus builds... but you can also short circuit all the psycho drama and just go try it out before that happens.

Many people fought hard to be able to testify like this in society, and a song like that is some of the art it produced.

So where can you find a poetry night? This too will be part of this chapter's practice – go find out. Ask your art mates. Search your town listings. Or make a point of finding one out in the city.

Go out of your way.

Each person's own poem or story, standing in the humble spotlight of a pub backroom is testifying to something. A feeling. A human truth.

Try standing with it for a short while. You might be short circuiting your knowishness, but you'll be honouring something. The other person. Their place next to you. And so the value and power of your own testimony.

Hold that thought.

LEARNING BY DOING

“ART IS ALL SILLY
DAYDREAMING ON
COUCHES.”



“There comes a point, fairly quickly, when you need to decide whether to freak out about it or embrace the challenge” said my dear friend Sebastian. “Embrace the expectation that every moment, for yet another day, could be your last.”

Driving across India in a tuk-tuk is a fairly certain way to feel a lot more alive. Precisely because it sort of risks your very life on a planet already full of terrible threats in a resoundingly pointless way.

Buddying up by drawing straws each morning may seem a fair way to decide who drives, but among the many life lessons that will come at you quickly and unexpectedly on an adventure trip with your mates is the simple one that there is courage involved in surrendering the throttle to some of them. And you know exactly who they are. As a military copper I once knew said to me after his first pursuit driving lesson on the

backroads of Dorset: “A damn-sight scarier than taking the wheel at one hundred and ten yourself for the first time is sitting in the back when some other bugger does.”

Lots of things will come at you on the roads of India. Anywhere in India. Absolutely everywhere in India, supposedly. Unrelenting, utterly chaotic seeming, pupils-dilating traffic stimulation – elderly buses and trucks and Premier Padmini taxis, loaded to the skies with vegetables, and plenty of sturdy old hooting Ambassadors and thrimming bicycles and nonchalant pedestrians and ambling cows and, oh you know.

We all feel we know. India paints such a vivid picture of itself, we can all smell the earthen heat and adrenalin from here, wherever we are, whether we’ve ever visited that massive, diverse, resourceful, explosively tasty, buzzingly motive, ancient, modern, spiritual, secular, partitioned, unifying, noisy, meditative, expedient, beautiful, richly colourful country ourselves or not.

To sappy tourists before they’ve been, like me, India is almost a byword for *experience*.

However, on morning’s like those in my dear friend Sebastian’s story, surrounded by the fragrances and sounds and proximities and movements and life for real, we would be reminded that there’s no substitute for actually visiting – for stepping out of our heads and physically showing up.

And also that the only way to survive such an experience with your nerves intact is to plunge in headlong and swim.

Dreams unlock imagination. But actually showing up rudely expands your reality.

A lesson I originally wanted to learn driving around the Colosseum in Rome for the first time, back when you still sort of could. I did feel a bit more more alive doing it, even as my insurance documents smelt of sulphur for a few minutes.

Navigating the heats of Kerala, on a trip organised by another dear mate, Julian – who himself is responsible for so many of my own greatest adventure experiences over the years – Sebastian I think initially wondered if he was managing to draw the short straw most mornings.

For he kept ending up with another friend in the party who had become legend after Julian's stag weekend in Norway a decade earlier – local neighbour to Julian's Norwegian best man, Anders – Jungmagner.

Jungmagner became legend partly for his ability to drive a John Deer tractor expertly while being both very saturated with beer and very not in the cab of the tractor at all for much of the time, but also simply for his unrelenting cray. Probably more even handedly described as energy. He naturally applied his energy to driving a tuk-tuk across India with verve in every moment and I feel it can be said that Sebastian went on a fairly deep inner journey during his time on the roads

of western India.

"He was of course," smiled Sebastian to me, in the leafy garden of the Troubadour in Kensington months later, "by far the best driver of us all."

Jungmagner never crashed.

Experience. To find it, you do have to be prepared to leave home. And seatbelts. And plunge in.

Experience economy.

That word is interesting, *experience*. It's a word I've found myself exploring in recent times, because it's one that's been thrown around a lot in the worlds of art and theatre but also marketing.

When I've heard big brands deploy it, they make it sound like a spell with asterisks and an exclamation mark.

Experience! is a key word in art, obviously.
Obvious to you now you're a secret art pilgrim.
Because it's the key TO art's effect, isn't it?

Works of art create a new *experience!* for whoever is interacting with them – and that's how they transport the person into a new way of seeing.

Experience! is also a sensation stoked by art that advertising and marketing has long utilised to wed us emotionally to spending money. The idea of the Experience Economy may be a term coined over twenty years ago as I write, but it goes certainly back to pre-packaged cake mix inviting homemakers to pay for a simpler, more consistent, cheerily-branded cake making experience.

An idea that may have tempted us with convenience and choice and a little domestic showbiz but which, y'know, took some creativity out of our own hands. Helped us avoid getting any flour on them.

As Joe Pine says, families ended up paying for someone else to create the whole birthday party, not just the cake, including the entertainment.

In the great shared story of globalisation, consumerism seems to me now like the substances it seems to most pull us towards addiction to – sugar, cocaine, alcohol; it switches up the sense of life and living at the beginning but is really beginning its work of numbing us.

Training us into habits of how to value things.

How do we learn anything like that? What does it do to emotional truth in everyday life?

**Yet, snap up your anti-nihilism pants here.
I think the word *experience!* points at
something of particular interest to us in how
art can change the world.**

And it is how we learn.

Experience! (–sorry this is getting exhausting.)

Experience is, I think, vital for the artist before they've turned it into anything.

The experience of *living through* something, you bet. The foundational material of a work – heartbreak, trauma, lostness, longing, exhilaration, boredom, anger... All of which you might file under the word Love, you large-living old raver, you.

It's also, though, the experience of *working into* that material. DOING something with it. *How* the artist does this.

If Sebastian's cray-seeming friend Jungmagner learned to be an excellent driver in all circumstances, it was obviously because he couldn't help himself from showing up – from naturally plunging in and doing it over and over. Not immediately successfully, I imagine.

As sensory creatures in a flattened, disconnected robot world experience of machine produced

cake mix, we may be longing for a little more ritual and mysticism and magic – more creative experiences in our everyday. But, before we get to that, I'd say that wanting to lose ourselves in cosplay in old warehouses says a lot about how we receive the world – and about just how amazing we are at jumping between stories when we want to.

It points to the principle of embodiment.

Embodied learning.

Artists roll up their sleeves. They try stuff. They get clay and paint and material and noises all over themselves, in a bid to see what that thing in them really is.

How much do you like to get stuck in?

Are you naturally circumspect, considered? Or do you usually leap in and drive?

If you're the latter, do you sometimes feel you're not doing things so "properly"? If you're primarily considerate, do you sometimes feel you struggle to make anything?

This is where the practice of art literally can make a difference to you both.

Following inspiration without hindering self consciousness starts a process. A process of *making sense* – something your inner you writhes to do when it's awake.

When you find the courage to reach in and pull out that idea or niggles of inspiration, it may well look rough. It may be partial. It may be scarily crap-looking – but with some grit of conviction in it. A trail to step onto, a form to wrestle with, a flow to simply follow.

But follow you must, or where will you go?

Artists learn by doing.

By adventuring out into it.

And nothing grows your wit, reactions and understanding like adventure. Or your resilience.

The idea that artists lie about dreaming all day is as laughably false as it is false shame anyway. What is to be criticised about lying still and listening regularly?

As intuitive as they may be, however, all the artists I know can't help but get up and try shit.

The image of an artist in my head is of so many of the female art mates I've ever known – they wear their sleeves rolled up, often literally. They make and they heat and they mark and they scribble and they produce flows of workings out. Experiments, maps and artefacts like clues. They fix things and lug things around in vans and poke around in odd places looking for stuff.

They learn out loud. They get things done. And then have the courage to share them publically.

They give themselves permission to say it. To confront it. To bend it into some personal sense, whatever it is.

It's a lot like the process of science, actually. Ask the questions and work into finding the answers.

As I learned from comparing artist Denise Poote's testimony with that of science lecturer Brian XXXXX, the final expo and the final published paper aren't the magic – they're an experienced expression of the journey through the research, the sketchbook. That “homework” I hated at artschool, that showed how much I'd really been thinking about the brief, is, I came to realise clearly, the real story of any piece of art.

It's the behind the scenes we really want to know about after experiencing the blockbuster showpiece.

How did the artist get there? Where did this ordinary human find the magic?

Of course we want to know. And I think art is *always an invitation to find out*. But find it for yourself. Make your own connections. Grow your own wit, reactions, understanding and resilience.

Shame that global education systems have resoundingly shut out this invitation.

Educated dumbnumbness.

“It's my contention that all children have tremendous talents. And we squander them. Pretty ruthlessly.”

So said Sir Ken Robinson, in his famous TED talk from 2012, *Do schools kill creativity*. In it, he explored with consummate wit and warmth the idea that the global education system is built on a deeply ingrained Victorian view of the world. A fundamentally unhealthy one.

“Every education system on Earth has the same hierarchy of subjects. Doesn't matter where you

go” he said. “At the top are mathematics and languages, then come the humanities and at the bottom are the arts – everywhere on Earth.”

And, he says, within the arts, ‘art’, in the traditional sense, and music – probably too, mostly in the traditional sense of learning an orchestral instrument – are normally given higher status than drama and dance.

Yet, he says, do we not all have bodies?

Why is dance not taught to everyone? Why are you sniggering at the idea – what would your relationship be with your body today if you’d had a natural school career of movement classes?

And drama – why on Earth aren’t we all taught drama as core learning? The arts how to express yourself with your universally given instruments – your body and your feelings. Those pretty fundamental things driving all the problems that make up the Global Goals working plan to save humanity. ..Barely make any curriculum

anywhere on Earth.

The result is, Sir Ken said, that we have an education system that, according to its evident outputs, is entirely set up around the world to try to make our children university professors. Abstracted academics. A teaching system that is all about the head in isolation, and just one side of it at that.

University professors are generally, he said with affection, people who live inside their thinking. People who: “Look upon their bodies as a form of transport for their heads. A way of getting their heads to meetings.”

It’s a product of a global culture driven by industrialism in the 19th century – education only came into being as organised systems to meet the needs of it. Ever since, “benign advice” steers us away from creativity in death by a thousand cultural cuts; academic ability has come to define our idea of intelligence because, in the end: “Universities have designed the system in their

image – the whole system of education around the world is a protracted process of university entrance.”

The net effect, he says simply, is that: “Many highly talented, intelligent, creative people think they’re not. because the thing they were good at at school wasn’t valued or was actively stigmatised. And I don’t think we can afford to go on like that.”

In the foundation of our education system, regardless of smeres of influence here and there over the years from alternative methods such as Steiner and Montessori schooling, there is still essentially only *right* and *wrong*. In the exams that really push the grades tables for schools. There seems so little interpretation markable in the learning of core subjects – the ‘proper’ subjects. So it looks to me, peering in through the steamed up window of the staff room from outside.

I know how much my sister in law loves

teaching RE because it’s one of the few places in the timetable that philosophical debate is encouraged to break out. Everywhere else, there’s no great need to teach children to assess interpretation. To equip them with more critical cognitive abilities. Or to take risks – everything has to be *right*.

But, weirdly for a high capitalist culture, all this is not exactly in alignment with the very businessy idea of entrepreneurship, is it?

Because, as Sir Ken says: “If you’re not prepared to be wrong, you won’t come up with anything original.” And we run our companies like this, much like we run our education system. The creativity, and confidence to explore ideas with it, is educated out of us. Arguably leaving us a stunted version of our fuller selves.

So many of the ways we tell stories are purely visual. Distant and straight into the intellect. Hypnotism. The increasing place of the

metaverse in our lives is no advance away from this yet.

Two years of a global pandemic has made starkly obvious to everyone that this kind of isolatory experience is not enough for us. We're built for so much more.

And when we do show up physically, we get instantly richer metrics for what the hell is going on – not just around us, in our real world context, but within us.

Artists simply get on with this in their work. And their work gets good because they can't stop showing up completely, following the trail, the instinct to make and try things, and so learn.

What we're really talking about is that word you can't be arsed with. Though I may be projecting there.

Practice.

"I believe that one of the major responsibilities of artists – and the idea that artists have responsibilities may come as a surprise to some – is to help people not only get to know and understand something with their minds but also to feel it emotionally and physically. By doing this, art can mitigate the numbing effect created by the glut of information we are faced with today, and motivate people to turn thinking into doing." says Olafur Eliasson.

But here is a thing. A quietly fascinating thing.

The embodiment of working into art does more than unlock your perspective or even your emotional truth. It often unlocks a profound sense of ritual.

The rhythm of regular embodied creation can reveal a feeling you might not know you needed.

A sense of sacredness.

Embodied yearning.

Artist Tony Spencer is interested in how sound and material can explore just that – a sense of sacredness. Based in Southampton, he spent a residency in Gambia, partly exploring traditional ritual and rhythm and dance, but his sculpture The Cube, shown as part of Bournemouth Emerging Arts Fringe back in April 2018 it looks at first glance like a very nice bit of furniture.

It's essentially an attractive wooden box on wheels with glass marbles set into it showing through a densely black interior, when its doors are open, all just big enough to accommodate a human, scrunched up. But far from some sort of magic trick, it's an exploration of sacred geometry, with sound and light.

"The Cube represents the base chakra and earth, which is why it was birthed during a full moon on an ancient burial site at Old Winchester Hill" he told Maija at CAS. "It was quite a journey pushing it up the hill at two in the morning. I climbed

inside into the dark interior, closed the door and drilled the holes for the marbles with a brace drill and bit. It was a ritual which let in the moonlight."

He then exhibited this in the Sovereign Centre in Boscombe. And it got quite a reaction.

"I Introduced people to what I'm trying to convey through the sculpture, it's ancient mystical geometry which relates to sound as healing" he said. "I pre-recorded the sound on the Saturday morning before the festival started. I used three Himalayan singing bowls and the principles of sound healing. Within a ritual I cleansed my energy by burning white sage, and set an intention that wellbeing would come to people who experience the work. I said a prayer to the four elements, and used sweet grass to call in support from ancestors and spirit guides.

There was an energy and intention to this ritual which I put into the sound I created; this is part of the enquiry, to see if it creates an effect of wellbeing." Perhaps even in a drab retail space.

And he adds: “The public engagement with the work was quite profound.”

People of all ages, interrupted in their mall shop by this demure sculpture, seemed to open up to the experience. In one interesting instance, as Tony says: “There was one boy who was really hyperactive and dismissive, who said: “What’s this supposed to be, the sound is annoying”. He climbed in and came out transformed after he spent some time relaxing into the space and the experience.”

This may not be a Merlin Entertainment-scale experience, or even *The War Of The Worlds* Red Weed Bar, but far away from the pistons and screams of Alton Towers or the vast geodesic arena of the docklands O2 or the renaissance round of the Globe theatre or any proscenium arch or white cube gallery or even a single screen, in the retail reality of a local high street, humans found something moving about climbing into a musical box. With a little ritual intent attached to it.

What are we tuning into there?

We are, I think, feeling increasingly starved of experiences that aren’t purely transactional. There in the shopping centre.

But the instinct in it isn’t transcendental, it’s rooted in the ground. The earth we connected to with our feet for hundreds of thousands of years. And grew out of over millions. We love whole body experiences.

And we’re systematically not taught how on Earth to drive our whole selves, born as they are out of the ground.

All of which dislocates you from your home. The Earth. And your own individual body, as an inextricable part of it.

Artist Alice Flynn believes this gives us problems inside and out. She believes we’re living in a culture of unconscious dominance that leads, she says, to the: “suppression of feelings,

instincts, sexual energies, creativity and other 'non-logical' aspects of the soma-psyche. When suppression occurs, these natural aspects of being then 'squirt out sideways' in distorted behaviours and damaging patterns."

What do you think? Does this sound like our world?

"Embodiment practices can help us feel safe in our bodies and more able to express our boundaries and respect others'" she says simply.

A writer, performer, maker and yoga teacher, her creative practices explore embodiment as a constant theme. And it carries with it some fundamental implications for our era of environmental and social crises.

"I believe embodiment practices are vital to remembering ourselves as interconnected to Earth."

It is, she also says: "a reclamation of our wild self

as an expression of the mystery of existence."

Reclaiming our wild self. Taking our conscious place in the mystery of existence.

This is language simply missing from the lexicons of our current economics, politics, technology and business. But it's language from deep within us crazy humans that art unlocks.

So. You ready to unlock some in you?

PRACTICING THE HOPEYCHANGEY BIT:

Perform an original something publically.

If you're up to date on your homework so far, I have good news and bad news here.

The good news is: You've already been learning by doing, by putting yourself through your first poetry class.

The fairly obvious bad news, if you're in this for the certificate is,; You're going to perform some of your own work next.

Now, we'll get you there, if this sounds like an invitation to tooth extraction in the 18th century British Royal Navy.

Of course, you may well be no stranger to getting up in front of people. Or getting down – your clubbing ambitions may not be over yet, for example. Memories of your first band might still haunt your regrets. The pretense of needing a drink first may be fooling none of your mates at karaoke nights. Whatever, the point of this exercise is to share and try something new. Step into a different experience of openness.

It might be simplest to grow into your poetry night experience and ask to share a little piece there. Or it may be that poetry was a one-off for you and it's something else entirely that's honestly twitching your private excitement muscles right this second.

Frankly, a pottery class would be a beaut' of an experience for this one. Can you find one to join for a night? It's public creativity in its way.

And, don't hold back, how hard would it be to organise a few social posts, a back room at a cafe one night, a couple of bottles of prosecco

and three walls of of a private exhibition of something you already have secretly cooked up? Really.

I want you to sit with the thought through the panic, or the dumb blockage. Stay open to what this can mean for you. Listen in for the tingle of excitement you'd rather not admit – it will be your trail to follow.

And this isn't about a *son et lumiere* – it's simply finding the courage to share something, and see how it feels bringing YOU out in a new way.

Because, if you can find ways to bring alive a truth of your story, so others get feel its truth, you are already on the road of the artist.

A vital road for our times.

BRINGING TO LIFE

“ART IS ABSTRACT
AND DISTANT.”



The sun had not quite slipped below the rugged stoneline behind me, dipping the rough, honey-coloured history into silhouette.

In those last few moments of the ordinary day, the dazzling low rays of our star still pumped heat into the dusty humid air cloying us together as the old city rooftops, encircling us, turned pink. But we no longer felt weary. Weary from the ordinary day, even an ordinary day in another country.

What we began to feel, was a strangely calm sense of excitement. Just waiting there, in those last few moments before we knew the ordinary day was over.

The well of the arena opening below us was a yawning crater, like a fearsome unfolded iris to the underworld, exposing who knows what

legends, creatures and heros to the first couple of stars blinking out of the prehistoric indigoing sky. And it was filling up with very nice middle class people on red carpets in the expensive seats on the arena floor, where the bloodbaths used to happen in the Roman games, watched by the proles in the cheap seats high above. We'd climbed to the very top and back of Verona's most famous, vast and ancient theatre.

I'd never seen opera before.

The lovely first lady of Momo and I had often pondered taking the cultural plunge at last, but I'd vowed it would be something delightfully playful, like Mozart. In the end, it was something fearsomly grander, and the spontaneous idea of a couple of other family members, on the end of a little road trip across Europe one summer that found my favourite wife and I oddly in different countries for the last leg. Which means she missed this spectacular experience.

As I said to her afterwards: "Sure, it was kinda

mind blowing. But it was loooooong and there was only one good tune. And, like, no dancing."

She shrugged.

How much do you like a bit of "cowcha"?

Before the pandemic reset, did you make it to live theatre much? Panto definitely counts here. Do you like to pop in to galleries when up in the city? Do you think of musicals or cinema or games in the same way as the posh stuff or somehow not?

Do you feel very differently about what is supposedly "high" and "low" culture than, say, your grandparents did? We know your Nan liked a laugh, but did she think Shakespeare wasn't "for the likes of'er"?

Ballet seems like the epitome of high culture, doesn't it? We've jollied off to enjoy ballet productions a good few times together over the years, because they apparently let in people like

us now. Mrs Peach has always been drawn to something special for her in dance, and they may not be Sheeran or the Beatles but most of the classic ballets have at least a few good tunes in 'em anyone can half remember in the bath afterwards.

Grand opera, however might, for my favourite wife, be akin to a modernist jazz recital or an intimate evening of Morrissey, acapella; something I could picture her starting a saloon bar punch up in the middle of to help find the 'proper culture' a little more engaging.

This production, though, just seemed like too grand a classical bit of culture to miss, on my one night in a place that Shakespeare invoked as a city of doomed love, oddly away from my gratefully so far working out love. For this tale too, like *Romeo and Juliette*, was of just that – a tragic starcrossing of lovers, brought to bitter end by politics. Guiseppe Verdi's *Aida*.

If you're still at the This Is All Just Old Stuff:

You'll Be Making Me Watch Black & White Movies Next, Guh! stage of what you enjoy, I feel ya. Crawling around Radio Bedside many Sunday afternoons in the roof studios of the old Royal Victoria Hospital in Westbourne as a kid, while Mum and Dad played Gilbert & Sullivan records to the patients too ill to retune to Radio 1, did feel to me then like being trapped in a forgotten storage room of a museum, an eternity away from a discotheque and hotpants.

But go with this, if you will, I'm building to a devastatingly insightful point.

Despite all the G&S indoctrination, which isn't so far away away from him in sound, I never really loved ol' Joe Green's work, epic as it reveredly is. But seems to everyone love *Aida*, as was obvious from the fascinating range of show posters lining the perimeter of the Verona Arena from more than a century of putting grand cultural works into a craggy Roman entertainment space, some 2,000 years old.

A genius combination, somehow, and a bit of a cue to the civilising effect of modern culture, no doubt.

But do swanky, classical art experiences like this bring things to life or keep life in its place?

Transporting or trainspotting.

As the sun dropped out of direct sight, the stage lights warmed up slowly. And I could tell this was going to be something... well, *grand*. A hundred-foot rotating pyramid sat in the middle of the stage, for one thing.

When the orchestra struck up and the principles emerged resplendent in exquisite costume of ancient Egyptian courtly life, the tradition of performing all without sound reinforcement was impressive. The glimmering light design and light-catching fabrics, placed across a vast stage space under the ever deepening inky,

stars-speckled heavens, unfolded a scene of something... magical. What other-worldly other word is there? An atmosphere all at once antidiluvially ancient, civilisationally old and much more recently historic. It just... drew us in. Suspended in epic temporary belief in something extraordinary.

Franco Zeffirelli himself, legendary film maker, had so commandingly staged this whole production that he had even choreographed a lunar eclipse to rise and unfold from blood moon to shining silver disk amid the constellations precisely behind the stage end of the arena, across precisely the three hours of the sweltering Italian night. Is there nothing the grand master wizards of storytelling, our traditional high priests of culture whom we so revere, cannot do?

It was three hours of *high art*, for sure. And it obviously felt a bit sorta fusty.

Across Verdi's rich and classically beautiful score opened out and filed through a series of massive

tableaus. A cast of a few hundred, possibly. Impressive. But, essentially, an exhibition of costume theatre design, moving around carefully.

Three hours of showing off needlework and woodwork and fingerwork, essentially.

And it *was* utterly amazing. An absolute spectacle of skill. ..That I couldn't very deeply connect with. Cheers anyway, Frank and team.

I mean, you'd have to be dead from the pulmonary valves down to not feel something at the climax, and it's a story that deliberately scales from impersonally stately formality to messy human heartbreak as it glides through its libretto, with the skill of musicianship and voice across cast and players that was world-class human talent.

From the narrative to the spectacle, this was art that felt as though it had a right to light up the shadows of millennia of history, because in so many ways it spoke across time. Pressing

anciently sensitive human buttons.

So I still clapped my hands off at the end, obviously because, really. Wow. In the end it simply felt like a *privilege* to be there.

But it did make me wonder.

What is the purpose of such grand, 'high' art like this today? It brings us back to the core question of this book, doesn't it: What is the purpose of any art, when there are some fearsome practical challenges to deal with in the real world?

Here, I'd unpack the question by asking: Why should art feel like something for the privileged? Is it because only the privileged can afford to be so self indulgent?

Art is the fanciful hide-out of the rich. Disconnected from *real* life. Right?

Well, music may no longer be the main youth

platform but, is it me, or are people still aching for transportive shared experiences?

Play for the masses.

As distant, highbrow or old school as *Aida* in a Roman arena in Verona may absolutely sound as an example, there was no escaping that night that an experience so evocative makes it easy to forget the world outside, with all its muck and blood and ruddy disappointment. Caught up in there, thinking of other past and mythical worlds, suspending your feelings about your own troubles for a bit. Surrounded by the buzz of something as sensorial as imaginative. More than ten thousand people a night there seemed to think so, certainly, still today in the 21st century.

Because, y'know. It's all rather nice, isn't it? Special. Especially when the troubles of the real world outside that ancient arena – and all the arenas of our imaginations – are as potentially terrifying as we all wonder about at the moment.

There is comfort in escape into perspectives and ceremonies reassuringly antecedent.

Culture historian Rina Atienza said to me, it feels like bad juju to be so physically disconnected from each other like we have been across the world in the first two years of the 2020s. And how it made so many of us long for communal creative wonder and joy again, even while also making so many of us more timid about venturing out and facing a social life. There is a strange pull and repell going on in us.

Where do you fall on the Ever Going Out Again? question? Is last chapter's public performance assignment still *out* of the question for you?

Looking at your lounge, gaming is communal play that may seem ideal for lockdown.

But I'd remind us it's obviously still something with a modern sense of distance baked in to the experience, if you're in your usual room doing it. Kind of the opposite of physically sitting in an

arena that can hold 10,000 people, supposedly just watching passively.

Under the action of digital gaming's special kind of agency and community, exploring levels of challenges together online, it's easy to ignore what it's not giving you. It's engrossing and full of noises to keep your attention and, if I'm talking about distance, a first person shooter can feel positively claustrophobic, with that weird intimacy of meeting someone else in world while stalking about judging what to shoot in the head. Plus, when you jump back into the game with your gang at an agreed time, it can feel like a digital road trip if they actually turn up this time.

But a lot of console games we're playing at the moment are still an experience that's essentially about visual language and immediate cognitive reactions. Flat graphics. Clonky headsets. Minimal haptic feedbacks. Which, put like this, does sound like our globalised culture's emphasis on disembodied living.

This takes nothing from the deep strategic design or sheer beauty found in the ballooning games sector – but that interface is still a mode.

Behind whatever we're playing, away from the distractions, maybe this is another problem of this era we live in that's only highlighted by the pandemic – emotional distance. Loneliness.

We long for experiences that bring things to life. Because life is all about connections.

But true life isn't just about feeling alive in single moments. It's woven through time.

While you're wondering what to get up and do with all this, complexity explorer Nora Bateson told me that she has a problem with the very word *agency*.

"It's not so easy to figure out what agency is, and it's a word we throw around all too readily. Are you doing something from you or from the patterns of your culture?"

Art of the people.

Judging by pop culture, it looks a lot like we've been wanting to escape ordinary life for generations in modern times. And for most of that time, art has been subverting this fantasy.

Often, art fully inverts the idea of spectacle. To do that deep art thing – expose shared emotional truths and help us make sense of what's going on inside us.

A painter that is often held up as a symbol of mid-century America – America at its imperial, triumphant, *John Philip Sousa marching silver band parades* peak, remember – is Edward Hopper.

His work you may well recognise, so famous is it, and it always seems to be speaking about distance, loneliness and pause. Emptiness.

His most famous piece *Nighthawks*, from 1942, seems like a stopped frame of real life –

a moment we might easily miss that an artist is making us notice. But in the stopping and framing, it is theatrically expansive and seductive across time, resonating even 80 years later.

It depicts the big empty curving modernist window of a diner, lit like an urban 2:00am outpost. A handful of people seem scattered across a space expecting many more inside. Like they're waiting for the cheery sunnyside-ups of morning, by which time you know they'll be gone. Sleeping it off, the honesty of loneliness.

Tess Thackara, writing for Artsy, thinks it's a more soulful projection that it first looks, suggesting Hopper's paintings always: "Represented something personal, the expression of his "inner experience," as he described it."

Processing the nature of a personal connection to an experience. Noticing the mundane signals.

You could say that there is possibility always trapped in those Hopper frames too, they're not

bleak, so much as a kind of staged melancholy inner landscape, waiting for the promises to materialise. On the road towards realising them.

But I find it interesting that so much of the American dream, the modernist promises of total control and opportunity, individualism empowering everyone, appears across art like disappointment and weariness. Not belonging.

And that paintings like those of Edward Hopper's have become icons of this unfulfilled promise.

Here in the UK, poet, playwright and delightful wag Peter John Cooper has told me often that we owe a huge cultural debt to Britain's "weird burst of post-war socialism" that created art schools and new theatres and the grants and culture of experimentation for more and more people to make the most of them. The very tail end of this is the Britain I grew up in, before the tactical nuclear culture strike of Margaret Thatcher.

But I think it's taken long into post modern times for the hierarchies in the arts to crack open to the degree they have now. For all the idealism of the 1950s and activism of the 1960s and funding cuts to more old fashioned-seeming arts institutions in the 1970s in my home country, structures and expectations point backwards for generations. Grief for the modernist dream haunts post-modernism. Half defining it.

The emergence of genre-ignoring playlist culture, I think, points to something of the future. Something beyond our post-modern lostness and inertia and the nostalgia honey trap all our lives seem stuck in. And that's pretty fundamentally encouraging.

Which we'll come back to.

Because what this brings us to is the real modus we're all in, in our era of crisis. The gameplay of storytelling.

Practical magic.

If art's wondrous spectacle effect creates *experiences!* then, really, what does this mean? Everything is an experience.

I think art's practical magic is one word: Theatre.

The way we tell stories. Because storytelling is not an information dump. The opposite in fact.

The English word *experience* you could say is a bit double minded because in one sense it suggests that which we already carry with us – learning. Embodied knowledge. But in this context it's implication is novelty – hitting an audience with a wow of new perspective.

Really, the word is perfect because nothing stays with you like a wow experience. Such moments mark out lives.

But there is a practice to making this land. Most

magic is theatre, leading you around a dance of misdirection and reveal. We're such silly saps, we lap up this stuff – humans adore roleplay.

Costumes, masks, duplicity, clues, lost buried treasure, ghost trains, representations, signs, codes, mazes, puzzles, fairground dippers, hide and seek. Pretending. Arriving. Shooting things in the head and it being okay.

We have to embody our journey into learning to really bond with it. Theatre is ritual. Rhythms to wind truths into us as our own.

I've long thought this is why prophets told parables – and why they were such artists. Tell people a story and they'll listen; a fable might wake them up in the night with a clonk of realisation about it's meaning – having crucially made that connection of meaning *inside themselves*.

Think about your own reading and viewing and recreation. What do you most want to hide away

in or be lead into? It's always instructive to you.

In our internally oscillating times, looking for transport and transition, the root word is also instructive here – *trans* means “to cut across”.

We want the safety of the straight line ahead but we long to break out across country.

We love the idea of adventure. But maybe our idea of it has become very flat. Problematic for us, even.

What is going on inside us, man?

“Art is born out of as well as encapsulates the continuing battle between order and chaos. It seeks order or form, even when portraying anarchy. It's a tension visible in Greek statuary and the colourfield paintings of Rothko and Newman, stopping off at every conceivable artistic movement in between. It's a tension that arises from our natural urge to reconcile opposites.”

So says John Yorke in his book *Into the woods*.

Now, because you're an adult, you might think storytelling is hipster babytalk. But pondering it is also helping us realise something in the cluttered modern world about how our primal human brains work. Because we positively live inside stories, as a way of staying alive.

A screenwriter who's worked on all manner of things off of the telly that you might have heard of, Yorke says that stories are basically the way that humans constantly manage to sort order from chaos.

People have tried to build whole new orderings of the world before – ghosts of this twentieth century story arc are trying to terrify us still. But the real issue going on there is the story going on inside the protagonist – be they a dictator or you.

If you are a dictator reading this, there is hope for you. Please stand down everything but the coffee here.

Stories give us glimpses into our own workings. It's why we tell'em. And it's not simply because books hold cold knowledge, though they very essentially do.

"Books are the way that the dead communicate with us. The way that we learn lessons from those who are no longer with us. The way that humanity has built on itself, progressed, made knowledge incremental rather than something that has to be re-learned over and over." says Neil Gaiman, possibly quoting Douglas Adams.

But there's more to it, he says. Somehow, it's not the non-fiction section in which many more of us find something coming alive in us.

"Fiction is the lie that tells the truth" he says.

This goes deeper than interacting with parables. I think we actually think a bit like we're characters in a story, day to day.

It's hardly surprising – absolutely everything of

the world around is just a neurological construct in our own grey matter, after all.

We make character choices about who we think we should be, according to the story we think we're in.

So understanding how story structure works a bit, from a writer's point of view, might help us unravel our own musings in a new way.

One aspect, as John Yorke explains, is that characters on the page and us characters shuffling to the post office have facades. They are ways of dealing with the tensions between our expectations and perceived reality – be it internal, between parent and id, as Freud would put it, or higher aims and baser desires in other words, or external, between cultural demands or promises and personal experiences.

In the journey of their stories, characters will have to face their fears to resolve their tensions – perhaps embrace their weaknesses to find their

strength. If they are to really get anywhere, and so make an interesting story, the projection, the facade, will have to drop.

As Worldweaver Press editor in chief Sarena Ulibarri said to me: “The hero’s journey is not the only way to tell a story”. But that tension inside us, urging us to be resolved, is the root of much narrative momentum in us.

Now, I’m not so sure a facade is merely cladding. And even if it holds no structural integrity to the building, a facade will likely look much better than a gaping hole; the character I play through my personality is part of the truth of me, I feel fairly certain. It’s a bit less of an act than it probably looks. After all, as we saw in our chapter on learning by doing, the things we embody we half become. Which is a big part of our era’s problem.

But if your regular practice is to hide your real face, to mask yourself, I’m going to go out on a screenwriting limb here and suggest you’re

carrying around some unresolved truth. And unresolved truth seems to eat away at us.

At some point, we must come out.

Some annoying thing in the human brain wants to resolve conflict. But without the pain of coming out, how would we gain? What, as knowledge-seeking but empathic creatures, would we ever know if we could never *feel* the value of anything?

We want theatre to lead us into the underworld and walk us around symbols and keys and rituals to help us manage our tensions and find balance.

I wonder if a good question to ask in the middle of this is: What characters are we playing in the current modern story of us that are going to have to journey towards a resolution of truth in order to embrace the futures we most hope for, when we dare hope at all? How might any new story of us change us?

Expectations vs reality.

John Yorke suggests it's this fundamental psychological firmware in the human brain, of so often not doing the things we feel we ought or want to do, that makes story structure resonate with us so instinctively.

All the big hitting psychoanalysts, he says: "suggest that humans live in a neurotic state in which primal desires are at war with socially acceptable behaviour" and further that they: "tacitly accept that these neuroses need to be integrated and overcome in order for 'happiness' to be achieved."

I have simply lost count of how many times I have sagely quoted James T himself on this: "I need my pain." I kinda do, mate. And while centuries of religious teaching inspired many to attempt to overcome their baser, more animal brain wiring for their image of God hopes, it was more modern thinkers that dared to suggest we should probably hold our dark side close on the

transporter pad as Spock attempts to reintegrate our two halves for a healthier emotional strength.

Yorke's point is that all storytelling is really about paradox – truths in conflict. And that's something we all instinctively feel.

"All archetypal stories are journeys towards completion – voyages from darkness to light – and involve the reconcillation of opposites... a flawed, conflicted hero goes on a journey to become whole, integrating the lessons he has learned from others on the way. Successful happy endings, both in fiction and psychology, involve the individual resolving conflicts and learning to integrate and balance opposing forces.

"Just as all stories seek to resolve order from chaos, humans seek to still the raging conflict within."

And he quotes F Scott Fitzgerald: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two

opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.”

That series of impossible balances.

F Scott F’s greatest character was surely attempting to blaze his own mighty trail of redemption, but in the end it is Jay Gatsby’s youthful inability to face and deal with his shadows that catches up with him. And, reading the book finally, a few summers ago, it’s obvious almost a century later that *The Great Gatsby* was himself the embodiment of his age – its chronic inability to deal with grown-up emotional truth, ploughing on chasing illusions of power and glory, trying to make images of angels love us.

The golden age of Americanism and all that it peaked our economic hopes to be, that Eddie Hopper seemed to redefine as a wan disappointment. The same world in slo-mo collapse around us today.

“Blest are those,” says Hamlet of Horatio, “who’s

blood and judgement are so commingled that they are not a pipe for fortune’s finger to sound what stop she please.”

If you put this together with what we’ve learned so far, I hope you’re already feeling that art doesn’t seem so distant and weird, or like expensive wallpaper for oligarchs.

“It isn’t academic, art. It’s about emergency exits and impromptu arrivals, things coming and going through the ghastly space where a person once was.” says Olivia Laing.

It’s precisely about daring to engage. With the unknown. Inside you.

“All artists are releasing that dark matter from the big black hole of the brain. So things you’ve repressed, things you’ve never wanted to think about... those are the things that fuel us” as Greame Murphy, former Artistic Director of the Sydney Dance Company, put it.

So do you long for adventure really? To come alive at last?

Our idea of adventure is perhaps compressed into the key moments of action, without all the hours waiting for connections at travel interchanges or simply walking for days over mountains. We want to cut to the montage that transitions us to the next set piece. That's what old media has taught us over generations. TLDR. We don't want to actually sit through warp time.

But maybe warp time is where we learn the most. The non-action. The embodiment of time and distance. The actually growing. This is the root of much more connected, indigenous, permaculture thinking. And it's been long removed from the modern expectation.

But is this a significant era of transition?

Philosopher Alain de Botin apparently described Edward Hopper's works as occupying transient spaces – "thresholds".

Events between events.

Spaces between spaces.

Permaculture is an interesting reference to put a pin in here. Holistic practices of more regenerative farming with a natural sense of solarpunk to it, it is founded on a key observation of nature.

The transitional spaces, the less intentional overlaps, the edges are where life yields most abundantly.

Welcome to the era of transition, baby.

PRACTICING THE HOPEYCHANGEY BIT: Keep a Netflix journal.

What experiences do you most enjoy putting yourself through? Ever thought about it?

What are you getting out of it? And what has gone into making it?

This exercise may seem at odds with all this talk of dancing out your demons at an Extinction Rebellion protest. But I want you to simply take note of what you're feeding yourself every day at the moment. And I'm going to guess that watching is still the easiest way to consume your story hit.

Reading is still academic head stuff, and linear, but it's participatory in the crucial way you bring alive what you're reading uniquely in your head.

Film and TV is a nice passive suck-in.

So what are you sucking in?

Let's look at it a bit structurally, together. I don't think you need worry this will kill it for you – film's theatre is too good for that.

But, in your sketchbook, note:

- what series you are currently watching.
- how often you watch each series.
- how much you mix up your viewing in one sitting.
- who the characters are in each story and who you most enjoy spending time with on screen.
- your favourite character's motivations and their conflicts.
- why you care about character's journeys.

- the axis of the drama, what's triggering the story.
- how living in this world would be different to yours.
- the themes of each show, guiding the story.
- some typical cultural references of each show, and who these speak to.
- how each show makes you feel.
- why you think this got funded, produced and distributed so you get to watch it.

You may well understand all this to a writer's degree. It's media studies basics. But what does it spell out to you, indulging me for a moment to take stock of it?

Break the habit of doing and knowing and whiteboard it like a physics conundrum. Stand back and look at how you've described it.

Where are you in there? And what do you want?

FINDING YOURSELF

“ART IS FOR
ALCOHOLICS.”



The sea is a wide, still, unromantic slate.

The hawkish silhouette of a Viking raider, unmistakeable, approaches the coastline in silence, hairline-faint oars at its edges feathering through the flat waters.

Slipping into a fjord, the longboat seems at a long journey's end, unhurried, loaded.

Up close, warrior figures pull quietly at the rowing, faces brown and pitted from weather, warfare and work; matted, braded hair, darkly coagulated wounds hatching across worn scars on cheeks, leather and fur and timber scratching a fearful charcoal mark on the pastoral verdancy of the inlet landscape now rising steeply all round the returning drakeskip's wake.

A mane-headed chieftan stands in the bows with

another warrior. He is fixed homeward with the dragonhead.

A sound is burbling from somewhere behind. Eventually it penetrates his thoughts and he turns his head.

A passenger is complaining. The Viking leader fully turns and steps towards him, standing over the man.

In a crack of reflex, he punches his nose, blotting his lips and teeth with sudden blood.

The chieftan turns calmly back to the bows of the boat, steps a foot up on the gunwhale, directs his placid attention back into the wind.

The longboat glides uninterrupted through the flat waters of the late summer landscape.

“Was that a bit too much?” he says.

His warrior gives a small shrug.

“Nah, you’re the chieftan,” he replies, “aren’t you supposed to be a little like that when you’re in charge? A little bit *crazy*.”

The chieftan keeps his eyes on the horizon.

“It’s not really me, though, that fear-based leadership stuff. Doesn’t feel right” he says.

Norsemen might be a view of northern Europe’s pillaging, tribal past through the lens of *The Office*, but it does make you think: Vikings were people too.

The Vikings are such a byword for conquering violence from the middle ages, they have branded themselves into history’s imagination as well as the Romans, with each generation wanting to revisit their legacy.

But this ruthless culture, built on legendary rituals of dominance didn’t half love a bit of art.

Their’s was a culture as richly crafted in

fabric, woodwork and ornament as any celtic civilisation, loaded with lore, symbolism and artistry. Storytelling and costume, myth and style worked in step with any courage, speed and efficiency that Scandinavian raiders practiced.

They embodied the word *saga*.

They may have terrified newly-Christian Europe for three hundred years, punking it shamelessly. But, crikey, did they like to decorate things. Adorn things, carve things, fashion things. Create an unmistakeable Norse identity.

They clearly felt they didn't just need cunning weaponry and brutality, they needed beauty.

What beauty do you need in your life?

What does it do for you?

And how do you craft your personal brand? Don't pretend you don't at all.
From those hand stencils in paleolithic caves to

the intricate carving of a longboat dragonhead to the sheer craft you put into your cosplay, it seems to me that we need a lot of aesthetic input and it's easily linked to some desire to make clear who we are.

Art is output of our search for good old-fashioned personal meaning. No matter how terrifying our time in history.

Amok time.

Ah, meaning. Sense. Purpose. Remember when all we wanted was a little happiness, no questions asked?

I think of something from Douglas Adams, here. I wonder why *The Hitchhiker's Guide to The Galaxy* isn't in the UK's national curriculum in school, preparing us as the story does so soberly for the simple explosive weirdness of real life in the universe coupled with an expectation that it likely co-exists with beaurocracy and a lot of

disappointment everywhere.

“Perhaps I’m old and tired, but I think that the chances of finding out what’s actually going on are so absurdly remote that the only thing to do is to say, “Hang the sense of it,” and keep yourself busy. I’d much rather be happy than right any day.”

Says Magrathean planet designer Slartibartfast, to Arthur Dent.

“And are you?” asks, Arthur.

“Ah, no. Well, that’s where it all falls down, of course.” responds the old man.

The unspoken backdrop to Adams’ story is a spectacularly colourful universe. Whilst technically devoid of life, according to *The Book*, because the sheer scale of the universe makes the actual amount of life in it seem round-downable to nothing.

The heavy implication of the whole world of *Hitchhiker’s* is that the universe is indeed spectacular. And humans in the modern world still manage to be unhappy, when we’re honest enough to stop pretending we’re happy all the time.

From my point of view, it’s hard to think of something more valuable for teaching kids about the real world than a book combining wit and science fiction. But that’s beaurocracy for you.

A fascinating idea tucked away in this part of the story is that of the Earth that Slartibartfast helped to design. Because, according to him, it wasn’t simply a planet – it was a super computer. A giant organic processor – run by mice. Or possibly dolphins. Certainly not humans. Designed to try to calculate the question of life the universe and everything. So we might stand a chance of answering it.

The great joke was, of course, the idea that humans weren’t the point of the whole process.

They were more of a biproduct. And a pretty farty, unimpressive one, is the implication. Yet, of course, this rather seems the thing that Adams is delighting in – the absurdities between what humans think matter and what may actually matter.

As rather delightfully off-beat education publisher Shmoop says: “Thematically, Slartibartfast makes a nice contrast with the mice. That is, the mice and the programmers are all interested (at first) in big issues — what does life mean, why are we here, blah blah philosophy blah. In other words, the mice (at first) are interested in getting rid of the absurdity of life.” Sounds decidedly mid century to me.

“By contrast,” they go on, “Slartibartfast is interested in the little things and in being happy rather than worrying about the big things.”

Is it even possible to be happy? This sounds like the most vulnerably naive hope, standing on any of a hundred different streets on earth in the

2020s. I think lots of us are rather trying to find some purpose along the way.

Of course, finding your purpose in life isn’t an answer a school of any sort can promise to give you. Your purpose might be to spend most of your life searching for purpose, and who wants to tell a thirteen year old that. Your average education institution the planet over might still be most likely to give you an answer like 42. A nice measurable number. That sounds below average to me. Have that tattooed on your forearm.

Art is the ancient marker of identity. I was here. I felt things and thought things and I might have made a difference.

The banners old fiefdoms marched under were sometimes called sigils, but these are essentially visual spells. Intricate signals of culture that have to be designed, to speak of some beliefs, in warpaint or camo, as kinds of embodiment meant to inspire us to live proudly.

There are plenty of things trying to speak to who you think you are.

So who are you?

And have you ever wished you were someone else?

Identity crisis.

Have you ever lost yourself?

If so, where were you when you last had you?

You may like to lose yourself in things regularly, but there's a central implication of art and it's to find yourself. To discover who you really are, in fact.

The first disappointment is discovering that this whole thing is an ongoing process and not a level to complete on a Saturday afternoon.

The first ray of hope is discovering there comes a time when this will make more sense to you.

That time might be somewhere on the other side of trauma.

I could illustrate this. But my point is likely made by pointing out that I don't need to. We live in a world that feels like it's trying to damage us at multiple levels every day. While we're trying to form families, trying to find companionship, trying to live with more freedom, more dignity, with less fear.

Our childhoods can be warzones. Our channels always are. Every so often, our home streets become them, and there is no unbreaking what this does to us.

As we saw in Chapter 2, this is just normal, supposedly. So how do you walk back from it and live a rather healthier normal life?

Art can remind you that normal is a far wider,

more colourful spectrum than the tiny bit you may have been inhabiting so far.

But perhaps the one time we give art a begrudging pass in our day-to-day Cult Of Engineering post-Victorian machine society is when it's linked to the word *therapy*. It is the way into art for millions of us. As a last-ditch attempt to get us fit to go back to work, probably.

Art is most reached for by people who don't call ourselves artists when it's an emergency measure for our emotions. It can be a significant mechanism for mental health – and how you live into it, not just treat it in triage.

Rich Simmons founded Art Is The Cure.

“Being an artist requires you to tap into dark places to create beauty,” he says. “There’s a feeling you get in your stomach when you’re struggling and there are two ways of getting that out of your system. There’s a negative release through drugs, self-harm or suicide, or

a positive release, through art.”

He found school difficult. Socially and educationally. A diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome helped him start to make sense of the inner frustrations he was feeling everywhere, but an artistic uncle helped him see creativity as a way to make things happen. And to change things.

Art and visual language was always Simmons' natural space, he shares, but as the idea for using art to help anyone deal with their inner lives, their trauma, depression, emotional misfittings, he began to devise ways to take experiences, workshops and creative opportunities out into communities and schools.

“People get stuck on the idea of art being just painting or drawing and that if someone doesn't know how to do those things, they don't think art therapy can help them” he says. “But what I want people to realise is that art comes in so many different forms – it's just being creative.”

Have you ever found yourself wanting to try something artistic in an emotionally difficult time?

A lot of people do, it seems. An instinct to write it out, mark it out, act it out, pull it out of you.

But is there merit in having this guided or structured, in connection with someone else?

You might think art therapy is all watercolours while weeping. But while you're sniggering at this I do wonder if what you really need next is a good ugly cry.

Bring it in, big guy, feel free to snot sob.

But structurally, art therapy is about using different methods to not just unlock emotions but bring notions and experiences out of you to help you make some sense of them.

It's linked to psychoanalysis, sharing the creative exploration of your feelings with a therapist to co-analyse what *is* coming out of you. It can also

be used more like psychotherapy for a therapist to study your work like evidence. But art therapy is also used for its purely therapeutic flow, where you are taking yourself on more of the journey in a safe environment of some kind.

You might focus on use of colour, or use of materials. It could be a very sensory experience or have quite a neuroscency setting.

The approaches may vary in the teaching, but the themes often revolve around discovering greater self awareness and conflict resolution. Art therapy can simply be used to improve cognitive and motor functions, of course. It can be used to rebuild lives.

Jana Hildreth claims that art therapy undoubtedly saved her life.

Posting on Bored Panda she says simply:
"During my darkest days, I didn't want to live and had no outlet to express myself".

It's knowing where to start, isn't it? Giving yourself permission to express something new. Now, art is a regular part of how she lives.

"I am a survivor, and my art is a raw reflection of my own struggles as well as the beautiful journey to recovery."

In a way, this is rooted not in the dark but the light, having an awful lot to do with the pre-damaged human need for play. And this is why children's work so naturally uses art.

It's as linked to the principle we've already explored in embodiment as it is to storytelling. Facing what's going on in you, and moving yourself through it by doing more than thinking about it.

But it's also linked to personal testimony. Coming out as an addict or a survivor or as vulnerable is personal power in the poetry night. And it can help you get a much clearer ideas of who you believe you are, when you've found some tools to

map your journey to this point, and the journey's influences intermingling in you.

But what happens if you feel your identity depends on a bit of pain?

Doesn't art tempt us to go looking for some angst to fuel the fires of genius?

Torture bearers.

Masha Savitz is a writer, painter and film maker and says that artists certainly know what feels good about working artistically.

"As artists, we know there is nothing that feels more satisfying than being in a creative flow" she says. "When creating takes us on a journey of unexplored territory we can see the growth in our work and we feel it inside of ourselves."

This often is the experience of flow state – when you're so absorbed in the intermix of inspiration and articulation of it you forget all time and

external cares. The adventure of it, the purpose of it, the under-thinking of it.

But she also points out that art also has a wonky connection to mental health issues. Namely, the archetype of the mad artist.

She suggests that this is a trap that creatives still fall into.

“As much as people feel it is stigmatized in mainstream society, conversely, mental illness is glamorized in the art arena. Glamorizing mental illness diminishes and trivializes the real suffering and makes those vulnerable already even more so, and, perhaps less likely to seek help, believing that it will make them less ‘creative’.

You can reach for references in a second, can’t you. Van Gogh, Hemingway, Cobain, Lil Peep, Avicii. Painters, musicians, creative stars who burned brightly and painfully, entombing themselves into our imaginations with the romance of tortured art.

In Avicii’s case, Tim Bergen’s family even describe him in their heartbreaking tribute as: “a fragile artistic soul”.

I suspect we like to keep our creative heroes at a comforting distance, other from us just enough to not demystify the artistic magic they displayed.

But I’ll say it bluntly: Suicide is like a bomb going off in a community. When a successful young star of a music scene as uplifting in its creative tone as house music takes their own life, as Tim Bergen did, it rocks the sense of their work in everyone’s ears. But I think that the emotional pressures building inside us that manage to wear us down and manoeuvre us away from the truth of ourselves are anything but artistic. Art can’t always save us. Perhaps especially when it becomes indistinguishable from our work and responsibilities.

What art can do, when we approach it as such, is help us untangle what IS going on in us – and resolve that conflict a bit. Resolve it but helping

us get out of ourselves and see us differently.

In so doing, we can feel like we've come home to ourselves.

PRACTICING THE HOPEYCHANGEY BIT: Interview someone who's engaged in art therapy.

If you just rocked up to a painting class for this one, you might leave with a bad watercolour and your prejudices reinforced about tepid easle posing.

But after poetry club and putting yourself out there with something of your own, you have

some good experience to talk to someone else who's really had to lean into a new type of self expression to do some survive into some new life.

And with your analysis of story stucture a little, you might be able to recognise how their's has changed through a big experience – and how art helped them express a new narrative.

So I do indeed want you to interview someone else who's turned to creative practice to make sense of their inner life.

What worked about it for them? What did it unlock in their thinking and feeling?

Use it as a good listening exercise, and a way to think about how people even talk about artistic experiences. How do you normally recieve such talk, such testimony? Perhaps you will be listening differently to this one.

Questions you can ask might include:

- what made you change your creative routine and turn to something new?
- how did you feel trying something new – did you feel vulnerable, silly?
- how do you see the experience now? And the work it produced?
- has art stayed with you through the healing?

Film it. Record it. Make a thing out of it, if your guest is happy for you to. It can be private for sure, but a finished creative experience you can read, listen or watch back. And share with others in some controlled way to see how they receive not only the story told but how you interpreted it.

There comes a point when you have to stop exploding outwards in fear.

As Russel Brand said exasperated to the bunkering billionaire footage: “How far out do you want to go before you turn in?”

PUTTING SOUL INTO PRODUCTION

**“ART HAS
NOTHING
TO DO WITH
A SALES
FORECAST.”**



“Finding silence in a favela is like trying to stay dry during the monsoon” says Nathan Bonnisseau.

“Top volume telenovelas compete with powerful sound systems. Evangelical liturgies clash with the shouts of merchants. Residents bluntly exchange anecdotes from their respective kitchens.” Writing in in Rio On Watch he adds: “These communities are alive with sound and movement, but they are so much more than that.”

Culture. What is it?

What’s yours? Where would you even begin to answer such a sweeping question?

I’d describe culture simply as expressions of living that grow out of a community, like blossoming

tendrils of bindweed, and tie it together into an identity. A mentally held idea of who you are.

So how much of your culture is yours? Or you?

As complexity explorer Nora Bateson said to me: “How do I know where I stop and start and where my culture stops and starts? Because there’s no stop and start.”

“Do I end at this skin?” she said, “Or do I extend into my ideas and my ancestry and my language and my microbiome... Who am I?”

Intriguingly for right here, Nora also said this:

“When you share an illusion, that’s so much more potent than sharing something that is real. Because it can continue to move and shift and shape.”

A shared illusion.

It is the basis of all communities, brands and

organisations. An idea in your head.

So what do we imagine will be the culture of The Future?

Culture is born out of habit, ritual, rhythms of life wherever its happening that I guess usually start from a shared need – we’ve all turned up at the same place, and find ourselves needing to do the same things.

Before long, we are at least identifying as people who share this experience, possibly sharing songs and jokes about how rubbish the experience is, if not actively helping each other to work it. And like bindweed, your culture can both hold the soil of your identity together and choke blooms of individuality. Identifying our id is a bit of an uneasy dialogue as we’re growing up, working out which bits give us a core of confidence and which bits are suffocating us.

Trying to recognise how many cultures, in fact, are always in our personal melting pot.

We can't help but sort of secrete culture, like the coming and going of bees pollinating plants while they think they're just building a hive. But we seem to need it. Because no endeavour comes to life without it.

The communities, the organisations, the products, even, that become the most successful seem to manage to elevate culture. Connecting us in the end by a sense of – say it with me: – emotional truth.

The point of all storytelling that creates... soul.

But in poverty?

For those of us in the hipster age of authenticity starting up coffee indies in beautifully street-arted old shipping containers in gentrified dockland districts, the idea of the cultural nobility of the slum isn't hard to picture. It might be blown up on the back wall of your Cargo Mondo Café with the logo of your favourite blend on it. It's always in slo-mo, through a creamy-lit lens, to the right

music. And the fact that I am taking the pizzle out of the commodotisation of such poverty porn doesn't actually remove from it the kernel of truth that we do want to recognise our humanity in the world. Even in our suffering. It's an emotional pressure valve to all the hopeless intractability of many cultural sufferings.

Someone might casually add that poverty porn is also another cultural reflex of extractivist colonialism, Fair Trade logo or no.

But the truth I'd point us to here is simply the observation that in the compartmentalised modern economic world we all live in at the moment, ghettos seem a lot easier to create than independent cultural melting pots.

Wasn't The Future going to clean up all this?

The category is Realness.

The favelas of Brazil's big cities are not quiet. They make so much noise, in fact, that their culture has escaped further than people who live there will feel daily that it has.

When suburban boobs like me in rainy Britain can say that the soundtrack to Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund's 2002 film *City of God* is among the coolest they've ever enjoyed, then maybe your noise is carrying. It's being appropriated into the life score for wealthier foreigners, yes, but there's an echo of your culture on some distant person's coffee table now.

Oh... kay?

So it seems especially weird from far away to consider that the colourful noise doesn't seem to reach its immediate middle class neighbours in Rio. Because suburbia has an awful lot to learn from such community life.

Bonnisseau asks of the favelas packed human landscapes: "What is it that makes these spaces so culturally vibrant?"

He quotes Jorge Barbosa, Director of the Observatório de Favelas and manager of a project that maps cultural groups in the favelas (Solos Culturais), who says: "the streets, the alleyways, the stairs are cultural scenes that are in fact very close to real life."

There is energy in a mix like this. Human life so piled up on itself may create some chaotic-seeming living, but it also generates lots of collisions of ideas. Everything happening within earshot, everything happening in public, everything part of everyone's daily, habitual life.

Biological life's evolution might look random, haphazard but, in just the same way, our human cultural life creates what looks unexpected to us – cross pollination and mutation. Emergence.

Chaos Theory and other academic approaches

would get excited about this and begin to codify it, that richness that produces things you weren't expecting. Urban Design legend Jane Jacobs might point out that this is why any city needs "teemingness" to be a healthy place to live in. To which Tyson Yunkaporta might add that such living is simply not hierarchical, enabled by top-down organisation:

"Most lasting cultural innovations occur through the demotic – the practices and forms that evolve through the daily lives and interactions of people and place in an organic sequence of adaptation."

I'd say don't be tempted to get too hung up on this anthropologically, looking across distance at someone else's culture, Nora Bateson would likely describe this as complexity just doing its thing. Marveling at "emergence" might show up how little we've been paying attention to the way our world works, how little we've been noticing the patterns of life all around us all the time.

But still. What stuff *does* emerge. Art.

That irresistible funk of the *City of God* soundtrack is more than just a great groove. It's not empty cool, whether it's the classic period funk of the story's 70s setting, or the contemporary beats shaking the steps of Vidigal today. It is an expression of revolutionary energy. One that people in other parts of the city don't seem to like.

Music artist Anitta's hit video *Vai Malandra* – "go on, bad boy" – illustrates the point. It's deliberately sexy, and the beads of sweat on your dad's brow will testify to how much it looks like more male gaze cash-in and 'not proper culture' to some. It was a hit, and so polarises opinion between its empowerment and representation of black female energy, taking back the the power in the expression of body moves, and the simple objectification of women, black skin, street culture.

The thing to consider here is not this one record. It's its cultural context – the favela.

“Funk and passinho are, first and foremost, art forms created in favelas that communicate daily life, hopes, dreams, and fears, and which draw from but constantly modernize age-old rhythms, steps, and messages” says Lucy McMahon choreographer, dancer, Human Rights lecturer. She highlights the just splendidly named Casa Do Funk school of creativity, which teaches young people the moves and the music of the favela as steps, beats and words of empowerment and identity.

As she explains, the Rede Funk community: “celebrates and teaches ‘conscious funk,’ a style that tells of the violence, pain, joy, community, and rebellion of artists’ everyday lives.”

Culture tends to highlight our disconnections though. Our lack of knowing.

While perhaps rather ‘whiter’ parts of cultural town set up actual groups like Funk Is Trash – with posts saying things like: “criminalise the funk, a favour to society!” linking it to violence

against women – is it too woke to imagine how many in the favelas might echo McMahon:

“Funk offers a chance of social mobility that is entirely self-created, emergent, and independent of any top-down social project, whether the mobility of the music from the favelas to other countries and into middle class homes and universities, or the mobility of dancers and MCs to positions of success and influence. It has the potential to threaten the racial and class hierarchies on which the Brazilian status quo is built on” she says.

Which all sounds many worlds away from another Brazilian urban experience. The hyper modernist vision of the country’s capital – Oscar Niemeyer’s Brasillia.

It’s a futuristic vision in sweeping concrete. The sort of thing architects and urbanists and old mid-century lovelies like me can’t help loving. A vision of gorgeous order. Buildings that Norman Foster, current daddy of all architects described

as having: “A wonderful optimism and beauty and light about them. They make life richer for everybody who uses them,” he said, describing some of the structures as “hauntingly beautiful” and “absolutely magical”.

Shame it’s all so hard to walk around if you don’t have the money to drive, huh, Norm.

But let’s contrast these human landscapes, each part of the home of solarpunk itself, Brazil.

You could say that they both speak of two things in their contrasting cultural languages – one obviously, one by implication.

Economics and design.

What drives our making between utility and beauty? Between practicality and art? Aren’t these things seen rather separately in Anglospheric compartmentalised ways of seeing the world?

Or is there a culture that seems to have been singing loudly in both these languages for most of the modern era?

Mad men.

In the age of innovation, there is a mythical land at the intersection of art and business.

Advertising.

Now, you could polarise things here unwisely. And I am going to.

Where do the values really point, do we think? Art could be said to serve the human heart. Business could be said to serve the robot monetary system. Advertising could therefore be said to put heart into economics.

Let’s hold that pause for a beat.

Now you may explode with mocking cackles.

Once you've paced it out for a few moments, I'll say that this is a safe space and you can testify to the stress, misogyny, coke, booze and youth addictions, the toxic power games, the endless pitching for nothing, the monoculture of creative direction and sheer infantility of retread thinking driving the advertising industry that you know and that has shouted at us everywhere like spoilt children since the second world war. You can even throw in a little sadness at the loss of classic airbrush artist skills; advertising is hypnotised by nostalgia, after all.

Hold your offense in check here if you've worked all your life in it and don't feel this way about it, I'll come back to you.

If you've had nothing to do with the industry then advertising may seem a by-word for a kind of creative corruption. The slick seduction of things we don't want. The serpent's slithering kidnap of storytelling.

Which, crossing Pandora's threshold into the

Web 2.0 world, has become the cheap 4Chan JPEG vomit of cyberpunk neoliberal values across billions of platform views everywhere we go. And that's before we augment reality properly and really start shitting on going outside; Web 3.0 is a drooling expectation that the advertising sector is wrapped around like half the tarot card for Tech.

But hey. Doesn't mean we can't have a bit of fun with it.

And there is no artist I know having more dark fun with it than Marcus John Henry Brown.

Marcus John Henry Brown doesn't simply believe that every business should be employing a corporate artist, he thinks all employees should be encouraged to think like artists.

Marcus himself is an artist, but for years you might have thought he was a creative director. So might he.

Then he realised “nobody in business knows what that is” so he started more openly embracing his roots in Dartington College of Art.

Strangely, he found that the business world understands the job title ‘artist’ better than lots of other creative role descriptions and loves to use. And he discovered this partly by simply punking, with art, a key ritual of business.

The corporate event.

Today, to me, Marcus is a friend and collaborator. When I first met him, however, I was an overnight fan. Because I’d seen him close out day one of Silicon Beach’s festival of ideas the day before with something so darned clever I stood to ovate him at the end.

Approaching him in the foyer of Pavilion Dance the next morning, I was probably the sort of fan he’d forgive doorstepping him before his first coffee – because I picked him up on a teeny tiny nerdy detail of his production that there was no

way I could have seen from the very back of the tiered seats in the auditorium, as he’d produced it on stage, but that I just *knew* would be there.

“That pill box is branded to within an inch of its life as a real artefact, isn’t it” I said with a glint.

He smiled coyly and instantly produced it from an intimate pocket, like a sacred relic.

“Here is the dosage advice sheet” he said, opening it and showing the 6pt type.

His piece, *The Passing*, was one of the greatest performative sleights of hand I’ve ever seen.

Silicon Beach, as an event, was and remains in my memory one of the most enjoyable ideas events with keynote speakers I’ve ever attended. Because organiser and mutual mate, Matt Desmier, built it around the principle that people most value the spaces between the talks – chances to talk with each other. Perhaps partly at least about the ideas presented.

But while the format subtly worked much more enjoyably than most speaking events and curated a bunch of genuinely cool, thought-leading ideas, it was still a format you understood – people on stage sharing slide decks while preaching.

Marcus took to the stage and began the same way.

Only some way in did I experience a personal dolly-zoom of realisation...

“IT’S A PERFORMANCE PIECE!” I remember lighting up as I twigged – it was all a bit of theatre. One that involved Marcus dying on stage at the end.

The greatest trick of theatre is misdirection, to make the reveal land. In this case, Marcus had misdirected us to believe we were watching another corporate presentation about hustling creatively. What he’d actually been doing was showing us a near future world where the whole schtick of adland had gotten so out of hand it

had become a political state. A brutally dumb one, in it’s self-cleverness.

The piece was hilarious and chilling and brilliant.

It was also just a slice of an entire fictional world he’s been developing in many expressions over the years, including taking over the main stage at Re:publica in 2019 in full face paint as a tech CEO so cultic it required an explicitly 1980s, Thatcherite, retrowave score by Momo:tempo – *Flex*.

He has been embodying art in the heart of business. And art’s vital capacity to change the way we see that we think we already know.

But his philosophy around this is clear.

“If you ask the impossible of your people, why don’t you give them them permission to dream?”

His Corporate Artist charter suggests that most

big business is committing corporate self sabotage, forcing all ideas through the 'proper' channels and inefficient working, slowing down those ideas to death and disownership.

Everything is muddled in adland gobbdigook that trickle down to corporate leaders around the world who behave as though they need to be seen to reflect some of whatever all this is.

By contrast, Marcus suggests: "The corporate artist's studio is THE way to find radically creative answers in an ever-changing world", built as it should be on principles of incubation, study and mentorship right in the heart of any business endeavour.

Fostering not simply a few folk who can think outside all the boxes but a culture that knows how to respond to it.

Silicon Valley may like to attract people with "a hundred ideas a day" as Ann Rosenberg put it to me, but corporate business is easily at least as

slow to get anything actually moved on as public bodies like local authorities. In my experience, they can't even blame accountability and a holistic responsibility for slowing down everything to a meaningless crawl.

Does anyone in business really want innovation anyway? It's a lot of faff without clear returns on investment that will likely just disrupt what you know. Yet business has wangled on about innovation for a generation, claiming it is about seizing new opportunities, and looking like leaders.

So what does business do when the disruption is climate breakdown and the opportunity is to transform our entire global economy into something more just and more resiliently shared?

That's right. They do slide decks and advertisements with ad agencies while, at best, not being sure what to actually do to change anything else.

But, reeeally, tho?

Business time.

The business of business is hard work. No one builds success without graft – and focus. In all our narratives of healthier living and better work/life balances, in our whole creeping awakening to our mental health pandemic, we can't forget that it takes preparation, vision, slog, resilience and sheer pelvic floor to make a business work.

It's takes conscious sacrifice. It's risky, it's energy-draining. But you do it because you feel you must. Either because fate has shown you the only way out of that stuck position, or because you just can't ignore the tingle in your water that you *have* to have tried that endeavour – tried to grapple an opportunity. And, in the end, it is entrepreneurship that changes the world – the sheer, daft commitment to having a go at something new.

You might argue, it is the single most planet-shaping core characteristic of the human. We can't leave ideas alone.

By the time we've built those ideas, though, they become entities in themselves. Things outside us. Kinetically-learned experiences we can't put back into our brains, and which can begin to control our thinking. I feel sure that the maritime habit of referring to ships with the female pronoun is because a ship takes on a characterful presence of its own, when you spend any time around one. "She's a fine ship" is the admission that the huge bit of steel and rivotting rolling around on the briney has become present in a crew member's imagination – wedded to them emotionally a bit. And a massive bit of infrastructure like a ship can do a lot to look after you, like a protecting mother figure, if you look after her.

She can also do a lot to drown you if she sinks. And that won't be her fault. It'll be her senior staff's fault.

Industry has challenges on the more massive and riveted and immovable-seeming end of the challenges scale. The landscape of big manufacturing and oil and gas refinery seems as rooted as the mountains of Earth themselves. Which is the thick end of our era of crisis, given that oil & gas drives the bulk of our climate target problems.

So rather than letting the big old tankers of last century's industrial hopes crack apart and sink in socially, economically and chemically toxic disasters of bad leadership, how can we build new vessels of manufacturing hopes that can stay afloat indefinitely, so we can carefully scuttle the old buckets?

My cynical introduction to the advertising sector earlier is more than a bit one-sided, for cheeky theatre. More dear friends of mine and people who's minds I respect are working across the wide spectrum of the commercial creative industries than in any other roles and they know a lot about how to balance problem solving,

diplomacy, budgets, project management, artistic flare and emotional truth than maybe anyone in their daily tasks. And all of them went into the industry because they thought it would be fun. And it so often is.

I also think it's more emotionally rewarding to work on project timelines in the way agencies do than be a consistent cog in a machine – the cadence of a story that the different acts of a creative commission give you, from the thrill of winning new work to the closure of a delivery.

The problem is really: what are you selling? What are you pouring all that creative wit into? For whom are you getting in pizza to the studio and not going home this time? For what cause?

Just what is your heart, talent and time *worth*?

Even before the climate crisis was all we talked about. Even before the pandemic. Even before war in Europe reminded us of toxic political narratives and the vulnerability of creative cafe

culture in metropolitan cities. Before these and a host of social injustices dominated the news and disrupted our thinking, we have been talking more about work for good. Working for purpose. Especially in advertising, design and creative thinking spaces.

Agencies like Nice & Serious in London make a play of it, giving their staff a say in the conscience of the work the business agrees to take on. Creative Director Tom once shared that they've made so much planet-facing work over the years he's commissioned enough different visual portrayals of Earth to make a showreel of Earths, which he did.

But even the futurism sector, the people who do foresight work and trend analysis for corporates are feeling conscience in a new way.

Teresa Inés Cruz puts it bluntly: "Our deep drive to continue propagating selfish ethics and our need to continue feeding our emptiness with overconsumption rooted in materialistic salvation

has driven us to the brink of Mother Earth's health and flourishing." And it's clear she feels complicit; "Our predominant role is as consumers and not as citizens of this vast geography we inhabit or as caretakers of this beautiful land we are part of."

In a passionate re-analysis of sustainability agendas alongside the habits of futurism and advertising, she identifies the same challenge as I'm doing here.

"We need to craft a new narrative of sustainability by first identifying what our current story is. What is our current reality? What is our personal story? We have been so conditioned to believe in one reality, that is often driven by a colonized narrative that separates us from Nature."

This is where I think Advertising could help significantly. As the translation powerhouse between art and business.

My own ignominious years paying the bills as

a designer and brand developer with ordinary day-to-day businesses has taught me lots about the effect of storytelling on our lives and feelings and spending. But one of the lessons was simply that a good ad agency in an ideal relationship with a client should be doing nothing less than influencing the very product of that client.

Not all creative directors would agree with me. It sounds judgemental. But I think that is a fig leaf advertising has hidden behind for 80 years – don't bring your conscience to work.

But if brands are built on behaviours, then the primary action of a business is the thing it puts out into the world, by making or serving. Advertising agencies are really, I've always thought, supposed to be strategy agencies – creative allies to help business leaders see what they're doing from outside the usual paradigm. A reality check in every way, brought in a trusting partnership.

Now might be the most significant historic

moment for ad agencies to find vision, conscience and courage to do exactly this.

One adland legend once said to me that CEOs are privately looking to agencies for answers. Strategically, they don't really know what to do with new stories of sustainable futures. But if the storytellers they're hiring don't know either, who will lead us anywhere?

So if we do need those new stories of us. How do we actually work them up? Just what should the corporate artists be doing?

There are more things, Horatio.

Design puts emotional truth into functional experiences. Elevating practical things into beautiful things. It is a logistical application of thinking like an artist, helping people to do more than their jobs better, but to love doing it more.

I am always tempted to say triumphantly with the Design Museum in London: “Design will save the world!” But as a comparatively young discipline, it is, I think, being called to truly spread its wings into maturity now, and break out of some limiting cultural habits.

Design thinking, as it’s become known, has partly been opening a sleepy eye to the idea of questioning who’s doing the questioning before doing any questioning.

Just who is invited around the table before you even open the layout pad with a pencil?

I’ve long said that an agency’s job is really to redefine the client’s brief before attempting to answer it; give engineers the wrong brief and they’ll build the wrong thing really well, as I’ve told many engineers respectfully, usually to knowing chuckles.

But part of redefining that brief has to include the widest range of insights from people who will

be affected by the outputs. And you don’t just list that out and send some emails. Even getting people round the table will involve listening to the space or problem itself, staying with it to discern some of its patterns and building relationships with those living in those patterns daily, to even imagine those insight holders could move into your neat and tidy design culture to open up confidently and give you their insights in a workshop.

What intentional change requires us all to do is embody the possibilities. Live it out a little.

“A key aspect of sense making or meaning making is to be able to simultaneously occupy multiple points of view in one brain in one head and shift perspective.”

So says Julian Bleeker, founder of The Near Future Laboratory. And one way he helps people do this is design fiction.

If you’re going to drop this phrase into your next

creative meeting you might want to back it up with a sprinkling of the term Futures Literacy to really sound like a thought leader.

Both these terms reflect practices emerging in problem solving that recognise the need to change the narrative. That the story we think we're in is deeply embedded and that it takes some serious play to shake free.

"When it comes down to it, the design fiction question is about going through the project of creating and activating and translating ideas about possibility into more material form" Julian says. And he is as much an engineer as designer or storyteller, making and testing prototypes as soon as possible. But to get anything on the bench, he first likes to get people time traveling.

"Imagine that you went to a possible world and you found something and you brought it back to the present and you put it on the table and you said what is this thing?... what does it imply about that world? Now you're a time travelling

archeologist and anthropologist" he says. Adding a wonderfully instructive extra detail: "Design fiction assumes there is a bit of uncertainty."

Uncertainty is not what the robot world likes. But artists flick the kettle and spin it into meaningful gold.

From the terrifying uncertainty of global crises like all those our generation is facing at once we'll have to spin new stories us that unjack us from the paralysis of looking backwards to old certainties. Because they were never really so certain.

But a single artefact from another culture can change our perspective in a moment. Because if, as Julian says, all the artefacts around us in unconscious everyday life, that only foreigners notice, "are symptoms of our consciousness, things that effervesce out of the way we see the world" then pondering what a single piece of cultural flotsam from a foreign future society might even be can simply pause the story always

running in your head to roleplay a new one.

We have the artistic capacity to do this. Like superpower you might forget you have.

“I want us to find ways to remind ourselves that we have an imagination, it’s evolutionarily important, it’s maybe the one tool we can deeply use to save ourselves from ourselves.” Julian told me solemnly.

Truly great design for the era of transition will have to be so holistic as to be meditative. I think. It will have to listen into emotional truth, cultural experiences and local wisdom like ancient art before trying to fix things. It will have to encourage old communities and build some new intersections of them. It will have to speak storytelling fluently but not simply in the narrative sense the Anglosphere is used to, but in the pattern recognitions of first peoples.

We have the innate gift to put meaning into anything. Make the repetitive ritual, place the

mundane into a mighty context. And, in the end, we have to – for we are wired to crave that meaning.

It fosters dignity.

There is a life-shaping difference between embodying something and going through the motions – it’s why we’ve generationally leaving inherited religions and faith in organised corporations. The personal meaning has to be in those habits, or it becomes a prison before we even realise it. Our inner live craves to get out and connect with the rest of the world.

In a sense, our practical living always reflects our true values – the ones we live, not the ones we say. And we seem to feel much more energised by putting purpose into our work than just ticking along.

In facing and trying to resolve inner conflicts, we can’t help but project what we’ve learned onto the ordinariness of getting by each day. And in

the end it can demand changes in just how we get by. What we want, what we produce and how we produce it.

Many artists have dialogued with ideas of production. Warhol and other artists played with and punked techniques, and collaged advertising images and curated found objects wasted by modern society to make us look at it all and notice something. While the surrealists tapped into the subconsciousness that we carry around with us everywhere to essentially show us that nothing in life is not weird in a way. Trying to help us prepare for life outside the awful certainties of the machine.

I think what we are trying to do right now is to find soul. Everyday soul.

And I think something big may be emerging from this.

PRACTICING THE HOPEYCHANGEY BIT: Fashion a future artefact

“Perhaps artists, justly paid to question change, can finally be at the heart of the party they started” says Shane Solanki in *The Wick* edition No4.

In all this philosophy, while people are dying from needs as emotional as physical all over the world, how can we make change real? Really real?

How about by making something real?

Fictional, but no less utterly made up than anything else humans fashion and put forth in.

In the everyday solarpunk future, what would a piece of trash look like?

What would a food can look like?

A medicine dispenser?

A way of connecting with friends?

What would be in the local shop that you'd buy without thinking?

What would your token of purchase be?

What would your favourite garment look like?
Your favourite tool?

I confess, I love the idea of world building before writing. What appealed to me about Star Trek in many of its older iterations was the feeling it gave me that there were exact deck plans and theoretical engineering schematics of the ships the characters lived in that writers had to refer to, alongside charters and histories and cultural references all those characters would have in their heads and about their persons and woven into their everyday roles without thinking.

The technobable was a sign of devotion to the world by the writers.

Go back to your big sheet of daydreaming from chapter 1. Now picture a prop you would make for a film or roleplay set in this world.

Make it.

Design it, go all out on the geeky details of it, picture its origin, its material, its context and when you've made it, leave it for a couple of days and come back to it like it fell through time onto your table.

What future seems real to you now?

COMFORT WITH AMBIGUITY

“ART IS FOR THE WEAK.”

Three people walk into a bar.

The space is gently busy. Low club music and chatter and chuckles and glass clinks wallpaper the space sonically, just as you'd imagine. No one tracks the three figures as they move from the doorway's momentary swing of daylight in towards the warm lowlights of the bar itself; everyone is chatting in their own groups in booths, at tables, already leaning on the bar.

One of them signals to the bar tender who may as well be polishing a glass as they survey the glasswear and cabinets behind them. It's not super-hectic.

“What'll it be” the bar tender says.

They order a spectrum of colourful drinks between them. As the bar tender returns with the

last of them, one of the figures says:

“Are there any nice walks around here?”

The bar tender cocks their head a degree.

“Can’t say anyone’s asked me that before.”

“We’re visiting. What do you recommend? We’d like to experience the local wildlife.”

The bartender thinks noticeably for a moment.

“I mean, most folks round here work for the mining consortium or are working out fringe economic hustles no one wants to ask too many questions about” the bar tender says like they’re considering it for the first time. “Probably a spot of blood money and sex trafficking and theft of some sort going on here and a general sense of frontier scrappiness... but very little hiking.”

“We wondered if you had any foraging tours” says another of the new figures.

“No, we’re not looking for trouble” smiles the bar tender and steps away.

The three nod acceptingly and take their first sips.

At no point did anyone mention the size of anyone’s head, the colour of anyone’s mandibles, ridges and gills, the specificity of anyone’s gender or the number of anyone’s limbs.

From Chalmun’s Cantina, to Quark’s bar, to Draco’s Tavern to Callahan’s Crosstime Saloon, a thing that no-one ever even thinks about when visiting all of science fiction’s drinking establishments is the diversity of alien life all in one place. No one turns a hair as something blobs past with a gelatinous physique or eight eyes and no discernible mouth or bickering with an external symbiont.

This, I like.

It is a comfort with ambiguity implied by

most visions of the future that seems entirely accidentally optimistic.

I used to think that *Star Wars* had basically nothing to say to society. I'd come to think that *Star Trek* had run out of things to say. But, in intriguingly low-key, episodic explorations of Lucas' incredibly rich universe in shows like *The Mandalorian*, I realise that *Star Wars* is a visceral expression of capitalist economic failure as the perfect setting for exploring finding one's spiritual truth in a universe you know you can't turn into a functioning utopia. And I've come back to feeling that *Star Trek's* central belief that the only way to survive in space is to know we need each other's difference may be one of the most basically important values any society needs if it is to thrive.

This is a significant effect of working in art – being unfazed by difference, because you're out on the journey of curiosity too, looking for new connections. Knowing you're a work in progress yourself. Such humility does much to create

emotional resilience in you.

How emotionally resilient do you feel? Especially now.

How good are you at dealing with change? How much do you enjoy diversity... *really*? If you walked into a space cantina would you even notice that the bar tender was blue and eight feet tall?

I hope I've managed to imply successfully that thinking like an artist can help you embrace the vital strength of honest vulnerability. But it implies something further, I think – not needing to have an answer for everything.

Art really is a spiritual sibling to science, seeking truth and sharing some practical attitudes, but art isn't seeking the empirical evidence trail to a hypothesis. It's more like opening doorways to universes for you to play in. Try on costumes and scenarios, to see where your truth currently lies.

An interesting output I'd observe in passing is who gathers around artists. A beautiful testimony from Duncan Burns to Julian Bleecker, founder of the Near Future Laboratory, is simply: "CEOs to skaters count as his peers and collaborators".

I think art can help you foster the power to hold opposites in tension. The magic of impossible balances.

And this might be signalling towards something fascinating that may be trying to emerge from our era of crisis and collapse.

It's an idea of where next for a society stuck in post-modernity. An idea I'll arrive at in the next chapter, that hasn't quite been pointed to intentionally by any new worlds of science fiction yet – partly because we've been so stuck in those very historic stories of the future. But while those well-trodden worlds have much to reflect back to us about what's wrong with the world we already live in – and so rarely speak to what might come after post-modernism – as

story structures go to pre-empt a whole new understanding of our culture, what most of them are not is solarpunk.

Because who wants to watch films about seed trays in old phone boxes?

But really. Aren't you getting readier than you realise to hang up the receiver on the old stories of us?

Paleoriffic.

You're used to the idea that work is bullshit.

You still don't think Universal Basic Income will ever work, though.

Maybe that's because you're still obsessing over your inner caveman.

"I am often told that I should be grateful for the progress that western civilisation has brought to these shores," writes Tyson Yunkaporta, from somewhere in the great ancient land mass we now call Australia. "I am not" he says.

"This life of work-or-die is not an improvement on pre-invasion living, which involved only a few hours of work a day for shelter and sustenance, performing tasks that people do now for leisure activities on their yearly holidays – fishing, collecting plants, hunting, camping and so forth. The rest of the day was for fun, strengthening relationships, ritual and ceremony, cultural expression, intellectual pursuits and the expert crafting of exceptional objects.

"I know this is true because I have lived like this, even in an era like this when the land is a pale shadow of the abundance it once was.

"We have been lied to about the 'harsh survival' lifestyles of the past. There was nothing harsh about it. If it was so harsh –

such a brutish, menial struggle for existence – then we would not have evolved to become the delicate, intelligent creatures that we are."

Your inner caveman – male shorthand deliberate here – is constantly judging you.

"I'd have been hunting and gathering" he grunts. "I'd have lived at the cavemouth nursing" she whispers piously. "I'd have clubbed things, gutted things, taken what I could find, fought people painted differently, rutted like animals do, died young.

"I had it brutally hard." Caveman states implacably under thick brows.

And thus the ceremonial buffalo skins of shame are hung heavily about your shoulders.

I'd order another flat white on oat milk if I were you at this point.

In his book, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous thinking*

can save the world, Tyson wins this month's Best Chapter Title award hands down with *Romancing the stone age*, in which he suggests that's just what lots of calls back to paleo diets and eco simplicity are doing at the moment. Including him, he suggests sheepishly, after his epic quote just above.

But the anglospheric icon of the caveman is a cornerstone of european colonial thinking and I wonder if millions of us can't get him out of our heads. About freaking everything – gender roles, fighting in pubs, sex, diet, hierarchy, the meaning of strength, clanship and race, the place of animal life, prepping, wealth, scarcity and, of course, getting a bloody job.

This is not new. Posh blokes in breeches and buckled shoes were scuttling about the coffee shops of 18th century England and Europe about this stuff, obsessing over Primitive Man and how far God had led the ~~entitled~~-enlightened white male from thence – and also, how far 'civilised Man' had in some senses fallen since an

idealised image of the ancient past.

The phrase 'noble savage' supposedly goes right back to a John Dryden play in the 1600s, so romancing the stone age and new aging indigenous people is as old as the roots of our economic system.

As The Art Story puts it:

"The idea of the "noble savage" circulated widely during this era, which many saw to be a decline from earlier times; society had become corrupt, led by men defined by greed, egoism, and desire for power. The primitive man, who is supposedly in closer contact with nature, was understood to be superior in conduct and goodness to the modern, corrupt man."

Ring any bells today?

This influenced artists and thinkers as a thread right through to movements and a long long list of people and groups, like the Fauvists or Art

Brut and Jean Debuffet, quoted on the opening page of my own introduction.

Which is all very well and condescending, even if it does signal a sense of loss in modernity before modernity was even fully formed.

What didn't exactly enoble people not born white in Europe and now badged as 'exotic' was trading them as slaves and building empires upon the profits and occupying their land and ignoring their understandings of life in those places and enacting laws that reduced those traded, occupied peoples to sub human.

These memories, these economic habits, these historic marks, don't disappear in a scant few generations. Duh.

How does this land on you? As obvious? As guff?

There is though, an interesting idea of what all this lead to. Implied in the influential thinking

of mid century media analysts like Marshal McLuhan or John Berger, it is the idea that art offered a Counter Environment to its prevailing culture, to roleplay alternatives, but that mechanised reproduction fusing with advertising and full-speed consumerism turned art into just another platform for the machine's output.

If there's truth in this sweeping assessment, it begs the question: What are our effective counter environments today?

How do you get access to different views of the world as it could be?

Surely drawing up plans for new sustainability systems demands this creative ability? I'm guessing using machine thinking to retire machine thinking isn't going to get us very far. Especially when we still bloody luuuuuuhv machine thinking.

Cultural impermanence.

There is an obvious implication from indigenous understanding to modern problem solving suggests Tyson Yunkaporta.

“Sustainable systems cannot be manufactured by individuals or appointed committees, particularly during times of intense transition and upheaval. ..If you listen to many voices and stories, and discern a deep and complex pattern emerging, you can usually determine what is real and what’s been airbrushed for questionable agendas or corrupted by flashmobs of narcissists.”

How do we really discern patterns of truth?

I put a lot of stock in the idea of Solarpunk, as a cultural framework for exploring new stories of us – a genuinely new counter environment, perhaps, that practices a decentralised, collaborative view very naturally. And as Ivy Scurr, exploring the subject as a PhD, said to me, in its forums and

platforms she felt people were more likely to be constructive and collaborative than in normal Web 2.0 forums. Which is interesting.

But Jay Springett describes solarpunk as really the political wing of permaculture.

Permaculture, from Permanent Agriculture, is a way of seeing the world that is feels to me a little better described as a way of listening to the world. At the super-local level. Where, it suggests, real change is done.

It’s a system of analysing agricultural plots to determine the most effective yield, codified by Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in the 1970s with their famous book *Permaculture One*.

If you’re used to images of massive fields of corn and huge combine harvesters filleting through them, it’s a revolution in thinking. A framework that friend and permaculture consultant Eller Everett says she uses to make sense of

absolutely everything in her life.

But it's a system actually codified for more Anglosphere academic minds from indigenous living.

It's built on the observation that nature produces its richest life at the edges. Where different systems of life mix. The most obvious counter to big agro's monoculturing of farmland around the world into single cash crops, propped up by chemical fertilisation and genetic tinkering. A machine-thinking approach to planting and feeding the world that strangely seems to be coinciding with the de-nutrienting of viable soil all accross the planet.

Permaculture understands that nature loves to mix things up.

But it goes deeper than this key headline. It's about the where of each plot, the local truth of each intersection of life systems on any given demarcation of land – and how you can discern

those local truths. An attitude to bring to those spaces, as much as a system of analysis.

As the Permaculture Association puts it, it is a: “design approach based on understandings of how nature works. At its heart permaculture has three ethics: Earth Care, People Care, Fair Shares.”

Which they feel: “makes permaculture a unique toolkit that is used to design regenerative systems at all scales - from home and garden to community, farms and bioregions around the world.”

Philosophically, I think it has something to do with understanding complexity, in principle. A living with richness that seems more like living consciously in the patterns of life wherever you are without always trying to codify them, because you know that life keeps evolving those patterns. They are living systems – and living in their truth means moving *with* them. Something indigenous living just does.

But practically what this means is some very applied storytelling.

With all that we've learned about storytelling, I'd say that here is where I want me and you to most understand what it means for an era of crisis. Because it's not simply about arcs, metaphors, parabolic teaching and symbolism or even embodiment and roleplay. It's about grasping that even ancient stories outliving civilisations are living because they are explored in community – unfolding in partnership.

I find it interesting that a buzzword emerging very recently is co-creation.

Nora Bateson would say that context changes who you are. The person I am with you is not exactly who I am with someone else, as we've seen earlier. And this means you help to shape the story of who I even am.

Aboriginal yarnning interestingly involves lots of storytelling techniques at once that add up to

nothing less than a cultural methodology for developing knowledge. Active listening, building on one another's points in the back and forth, gesture, play, props and symbolism – it sounds like a way to do much more than solve problems, but but knit together living community.

In the gamified digital age of the globalised world, everyone playing games on devices, in user experiences and with each other, Dungeons & Dragons score cards for everything, hexing out our worlds and chewing over game theory, it all sounds to me like we are nose-diving life into the ground because incredibly neurologically sophisticated human beings have forgotten the hell how to really play.

Letting go.

In my own search for narrative understanding here, I wonder if what I'm discovering is truly at odds with the modernism I grew up in the light of: Decay and collapse, and how to now live in the

light of something beyond it.

Given that *Unsee The Future's* tagline is *how to encourage the more hopeful human tomorrow*, this might seem a gut-punch.

But the question mark for me is over the timescale. For I am letting acceptance seep in very slowly that the rest of my life is likely to be a deep exploration of grief.

How have you dealt with loss?

Is it an alien thing to you, still rotting your bones? Is it a hook in your side you've learned to carry around? Is it something you've moved far enough past to sometimes forget about? All of those things, depending on what you've lost, I'm guessing.

I learned during years dealing with depression that hope can be a fear. The promise of things that can never be. People coming back, opportunities magically appearing, personal

attributes reconfiguring with a spell. True grief, however you shuffle its different stages, arrives eventually at acceptance – and this seems a very indigenous view to me now.

Because at the root of acceptance is your very self. If you are to accept your place in the process of life – ie: that you are not in control of life – you are tacitly accepting your fundamental value is not tied to your agency. You are a part of life, no matter what you do, and so part of it's intrinsic value.

You might act like a bit of a knob. You might be driven destructively by fear of being less than the story in your head is telling you you should be by now. You might have grown up with violence. You might not be very funny.

But eldership tells us that we can hold a light for generations long yet to come. And that this might be the very best way to light our way today.

I've said a few times lately, without yet feeling

the molten heat of its truth, that I now see myself standing in the middle of a long, pedestrian suspension bridge over a chasm, trying to help as many people over it as possible. Knowing I will go down with the bridge when the flames below do for the ropes.

Or the rope, singular. For it feels like much more of an impossible balance we're being called to, to cross at all.

The tightrope we are perhaps being called to cross, over the harrowing gorge of fire to the future, maybe demanding we balance wisdoms that have been in competition throughout modernity – evidence and agency with mysticism and waiting.

But perhaps what the shifting, breathing, kaleidoscopic wisdom of first peoples is trying to tell us is that there is no chasm. The past, the future, the now all co-exist, different story influences in our imaginations, right where we are. And that the most realistic response we can

make to great arcs of history is to plant seeds in the right place, at the right time, and tend to them.

You can't fix it. The world around you. You can plant seeds in it. By sharing ideas, by trying new things, by telling better stories of us, by living more life-filled lives. By taking a stand, at just the right moment, by standing down at just the right moment.

Life will do the rest, as it will. And, in the end, you need only testify to it.

Such a life might happen to encourage an ancient sense of hope we can all begin to sense.

Thinking and practicing life a bit more like an artist might give you the strength to stand in the middle of such uncertainty listening, while not freaking-the-hell-out about it.

PRACTICING THE HOPEYCHANGEY BIT: Sit in nature for a weekend.

Let's see if you can do this without mushrooms.

Active imagination work may seem the preserve of year one drama students but let's take this in the spirit of Sir Ken Robinson wondering why we're not all taught drama throughout school.

I'm going to fully quote a dead simple exercise by Jasmine Dale in her book, *Permaculture Design Companion*:

"Extend your mind's eye down through the ground as if you have roots, imagining the rocks beneath the soil wherever you are. Imagine if you can beneath the earth's crust right to the molten rock and liquid core of the planet.

Bringing your attention back through your feet to your whole body, notice the surface of your skin. Feel the weight of your clothes and the sensory quality of their texture. Feel the air on your face and skin, its temperature, its movement and origin or direction.

What can you taste? Are there smells you can detect? Of yourself, others, the place around you?

Finally, what can you hear. Take a minute with your eyes closed to really hone into the soundscape around you. Start with the sound of your own breath, the crinkle of your clothes and gradually move your attention outward. Take in the subtlest of sounds around you, extending your hearing to the far distance."

Could you switch off your phone and live more like this for a whole weekend?

It's meditation, which you might be used to practising. But it's activating your imagination

outward into the world around you, rather than inward into your inner life.

What might happen if doing this was normal for children across the world? So normal, teenagers reached for it to stay grounded.

What if we did it in groups?

What if we did it around problems to solve?

Could it have anything to say to us about where the collective story of us goes next on Earth?

Could it help us discern what comes after post-modernism?

And... I know what you're going to add.

What job you can get in it?

CONNECTED PERSPECTIVE

“ART DOESN'T MAKE
A DIFFERENCE.”



“What gives, man? A cestode tapeworm’s purpose is to get eaten by flamingos so they can turn pink.” said Rina Atienza to me.

She looked at me incredulously. Like this is just one wacko example of the way life really is.

Which it is. Because life is one big multiverse of nutjob, lala-cakes-fuelled interdependence that has some things seem to get up in the morning just to get eaten by something else.

The bright pink motif may be bang on brand for Momo, but also for this chapter – because the colour of the flamingo really signals the principle of unintended consequences. Which is a principle of living consciously with complexity so essential it is foundationally indiginous – and I think helpful to navigating an era of crisis.

Know you don't live in isolation.

Flamingolepis Liguloides doesn't go to work to give a tall wading bird an iconic look. It goes to work to get pushed through the digestive system of shrimp, because it most likes to mate in a shrimpy stomach, presumably because: Reasons. You're not the only one who likes a giant clamshell bed, honey.

Along the way, F Ligulo increases the unsuspecting crustacian's carotenoids, boosting the host's red pigments – and, voila!, shrimpy pinkness eaten by subsequently pink flamingos.

There seems to be a small matter of the transaction castrating the shrimp while simultaneously making them helplessly extra horny, so that they bunch together in desperate, giant pink numbers more scrummily visible to hungry 'Mingos, like turning up to a party looking for l'amour but finding yourself more enamoured with the host's National Geographic shelf right before getting eaten by a muppet bigger than the

whole apartment block.

Ah, love.

And it isn't love. It's brutal-seeming expedience, to poetry-loving silly humans. But it certainly is interdependence – the tapeworms get to reproduce, the shrimp get to beef up with extra lipids and antioxidants to live longer in wider environments and flamingos get to kick off the *Miami Vice* opening titles. Everyone's stock goes up. Albeit in a slightly parasitic way.

Rina's point, alongside so many people I've spoken to across *Unsee The Future*, is that life makes more sense when you understand you're part of something bigger.

Which isn't about existing just to get eaten – stop letting your judgy inner caveman near your nihilism gland. You have consciousness to the Bad Spoken Word & Inappropriate Jokes level of agency; the plot might be lumpy, but you do get some say in writing your story.

But with all the pressure to come up with your best life amid a thousand choices a day, *knowing your place* is a notion feeling creepingly soothing to us atomised post-moderns. We can get hooked on nostalgia during terrifying uncertainties, a fact not exactly un-exploited by algorithm-jerking techbros and populists in the early 21st. Like parasites, luring you with pink.

Knowing your place is an ironic way to want soothing, given that the machine age that supercharged all our global problems was all about creating certainty by putting everything into definite boxes.

But that's not the kind of *knowing of our place* I think we'll need to navigate the era of crisis.

Plus, sidenote: In the middle of all this, how are you getting on with still not fitting into any box?

You're so creative. You.

Geography slacks.

Do you feel like you don't really fit in?

It's hard to find anyone who really gets you, sure. You're ahead of your time, undoubtedly, and too complex for most narcissistic mortals, THAT's for damned sure. But I mean as fundamentally as your sense of role in life.

Have you settled into some roles it's just too hard to not fall into? Parent? Provider? Achiever? Failure? All much easier to find yourself labeled with than Artist.

Do you find it hard to find a place to plug in your passion? Do you find it hard to tell people at parties what it is you do – and what you're even passionate about?

Are you a bit of a geography teacher?

The lovely first lady of Momo could have been a geography teacher. In the vaguely preposterous

privilege of having been together for so long, I've watched her explore her calling from inception, but there is one word she's always used about herself as a bit of a burden.

A generalist.

Caroline did a Geography degree. Something about People & The Environment was a theme of passion and interest for her from childhood but at eighteen, she wasn't sure what else to do with it. Out of this dawned the idea of Town & Country Planning which, many years into exploring such work widely, led to another revelation for her of moving those experiences into urban design.

Throughout her career so far, while I was making music, magazines, posters, shows and jokes, she would say a little forlornly: "I wish I had a thing to put on the fridge. But I'm a bit of a generalist. ..I *could* put a local area appraisal report on the fridge." Because she can make jokes as well as I can.

In fact, people have long joked about the Geography degree being the academic course for people who have no idea what else to do. I think this has long stuck like a small barb of shame in my remarkable wife and unnecessarily so – not just because it's dumb criticism but because people are finally beginning to queue up to identify as she does.

"Oh, of course I was *a/ways* a generalist."

There will undoubtedly already be somewhere in an ironic used shipping container a Generalist's Café, a place for all the people who don't fit career boxes to go. But strangely, you might think, I am absolutely a generalist as well.

One of Caroline's greatest skills is reading the world with a fascinating innate combination of empathy and logic. I've joked since the film that she could always see the matrix. See through the showbiz BS of this world. But not fitting into this world's boxes can leave you adrift and rather reduced in your earning capacity. She may have

done well, despite this, but partly because she is enduring and can see that change takes a long time.

Yet, as her work began to have her using more overtly design kind of language, like the art school kid on her arm, we discovered even more of a shared language for making sense of the world.

Maybe this is why we've always found each other's work so interesting, even when the work's looked unglamorous. The problem-solving and context analysis of creativity has always been the hook to our imaginations; maybe we should simply have gotten jobs in California, not Dorset.

We are both *sensemakers*. Though only one of us is pretentious enough to drop it readily into conversations and his Linked In profile with no formal qualification.

And sensemaking is typical behaviour of an artist.

To make connections, to synthesise, to understand context well enough to tell stories about it that help us see it differently.

Are you wired to do this? To see the matrix around you? Cause and effect and flow?

I have news. Grab your things – you're up.

Sensemake-off.

Today, in our era of crisis, many voices seem to be telling us we *need* sensemakers. Pattern recognisers. Listeners. Connectors. Community understanders. Permacultural thinkers.

As a music maker, as a designer, as a presenter – in all my roles as a creative director – I know how much I need specialists. To commission them to help me bring alive whatever I'm trying to make. But they need the brief. The context to apply their brilliant practiced knowledge.

So who finds the brief the interesting bit of work?

Perhaps it's the non-specialist, who enjoys bringing together lots of specialisms at once.

It seems that increasingly more and more of us are feeling able to admit on Linked In and anywhere that our CV makes no sense, our professional resume is blurred hopelessly with our personal life and we never quite knew what the hell to tell the careers person at school and still wouldn't.

Turns out you don't have to be a freaking flamingo. Or a parasite.

The generalist is more interested in the relationships that the bird, the worm, the shrimp all live in together.

I've said often that art was my Get Out Of Jail card, growing up. I didn't much realise it, it just sorta worked. As a non-sports boy, I could perform occasionally and at least have some sort

of Thing. I could kind of draw well enough to be an Art Kid and this was also part of the Thing. It was enough specific seeming skill to survive the jungle of school intact.

It's as I've grown through the different ignominious but fun chapters of my life practicing creativity, exploring music with storytelling passion and making unglamorous things for other people to pay the bills and glimpse the real world, I've realised that the reason people STILL bloody ask me "what exactly is it" that I "do" is a basic marketing fail on my part created by my generalism.

The reason I never got good at playing the piano as a music artist is because I was always so distracted with the whole production.

I may look like an arty blighter, but I'll never be a true maestro. I'm more of a flash-Harry conductor. Which the orchestra doesn't exactly need, but definitely adds some zing.

And if I'm also the composer, I'm the reason they're all there in the first place.

But composing is just the artistic grunt work – making an output. Sensemaking is thinking about the context and motivation first. Which, as we've seen, is where art can bring alive the seeing.

Marshal McLuhan suggests his counter environments because he thinks that when it comes to the buggered world system we're in: "The imperceptibility of the environment, the ground rules, the pervasive structure, the overall pattern eludes perception..."

"We have fashioned for ourselves a world of artefacts and images that are intended not to train perception of awareness but to insist that we merge with them."

Conformity with the system man. It wants you to go to sleep and play along.

When environmental preachers and progressives

simply *talk about* "waking up", we can be angrily resistant to challenging what we've wedded ourselves to; that story we think we're in that's shaped us.

In the web 2.0 years, as Rina puts it, we love to keep "choosing the drama" instead of the act of creation.

"The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without resistance" suggests McLuhan, concluding: "The serious *artist* is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception."

For *technology* you can simply read *change*. But note here an interesting detail: He doesn't say *architect*. And he certainly doesn't stop at *analyst*.

Classic Neo.

In our crack-addled commitment to retreads, there's one franchise revival that might seem a little ironic. But the narrative shift in *The Matrix: Resurrections* from the first three films is interesting. Because it's no longer an architect behind the manipulation but an analyst.

The original *Matrix* movie is, of course, quite a work of art. A pinnacle of technical and creative achievement that doesn't just bring out the best of every creative element, fusing into something greater than the sum of its parts, it somehow got out into the bloodstream of mainstream culture to mark a big shared moment. But what IS that moment?

I wonder whether *The Matrix* stands at the threshold of Generation X and Millennial thinking. The whole idea of the story is that we are all asleep in a somnambulous technocracy – machines keeping us docile and unaware. There is a distant yearning still for utopia – for Zion

- and for the agency of a good rebellion. But only from the few. A yearning written to show dissatisfaction with accepting disappointment, as GenXers seemed to, faced with the overwhelming failure of all the machine age's promises of optimistic certainty, total control.

In the story, Cypher embodies the honesty and shame of this flatlining response to all that's wrong in the world; "I don't wanna remember nothing – *nothing*".

But, in the end, gosh-darn it all, we cynical Cyphers DO long for Neo – a freaking saviour. And a classic one – reluctant, humble, brilliant in talent to such unknowing degree, yet elevating technology beyond art into life force itself.

Neo was, in a way, the first big Marvel character. A story arc that has backdropped the growing up of Millennials. *The Matrix* is perhaps GenXers also admitting we want heroes to rescue us.

Joe Scott suggests that Millennial Anxst is

understandable, given that people born between 1980 and around the time *The Matrix* opened grew up with a sense of global peace and prosperity; us lot born in the fifteen years before those dates grew up with armageddon possible at any waking moment.

For all of us, I'd suggest, the Cold War was just the taster course for the banquet of despair we're all being force-fed today. But no one, however charmingly reluctant, floored, imperfect, damaged, is coming to rescue us with god-like powers and calling. That narrative has ended. It's ending may be the point.

This is not the age of the hyper specialist loner. Our era of transition is the age of the generalist with a tinkering of specialisms also in the tool belt. But not simply to roll up artistic sleeves and get some new ideas on the bench. It's to do it knowing what our new philosophical context really is.

Bullet time.

Matrix 4 is an interesting oddball movie. It's floored, I think upon first belated viewing, because I feel it trades sometimes a bit meekly on nostalgia for its own franchise while trying to highlight that very thing and some of the problems of our age around it, as our age has moved on from the mid 90s.

But, man, does it have lots of instructive things to highlight, if we're happy to pay attention to it as that kind of experience. Something many of its original fans don't seem to have been, rather making its unhappy narrative point.

It, yes, suggests that our infatuation with Neo was lopsided and that – spoilers! – Neo was not the “one”, there were always two. He and Trinity. (With my story wonk hat on I can't help feeling that if they are tempted back for another coda to it all there will turn out to be “three”, so making sense of Trin's very name, but unhelpful tangent.)

But a big theme too may be shown in the shift from The Architect of the Matrix to The Analyst. The shift from The failed utopianism of the machine age, modernism and individualism into the long 20th century of the networked age, post-modernism and nihilism – and what might be emerging next.

Those techbro wizards of Web 2.0 realised you couldn't control the complexity of the modern world's stories. Watching the data flows, even as far back as the 80s and 90s, later brought to life in the mobile emergence of the internet, some players emerged who felt they could profit from influencing the data flows. Voila Trump and Brexit and an algorithmic age addicted to drama. Addicted to negative search results.

Matrix 4 uses some disturbing imagery to make the point that millions of us would rather become suicide bombs of narcissism, addicted to the comfort of our pain, our drama, than open ourselves to the way of creation.

Because what the hell could give us the courage to trust uncertainty instead of the consistency of “how much damned noise the Matrix pumps in your head”?

In what can we put our faith to trust the silence?

Timothy Morton raises the the idea in Tibetan Bhudism of *the bardo* – a time between times, between one life and the next.

In an era of transition, are we being called to stop longing for so many bloody definites?

In considering how to build a world capable of surviving, he says: “The ecological society to come must be a bit haphazard, broken, lame, twisted, ironic, silly, sad – yes, sad.”

It is the ungraspability of beauty, he suggests, that makes beauty attractive. The just-out-of-reachness. In painterly terms, I might think of local colour – tone that is in no way flat but built with juxtapositions of different colours.

He suggests, in fact, that so much ecological exhortation in our era of crisis is so desperate to wake us up from the Matrix dream it is, just like the machine learning that got us into this mess, not understanding the need to avoid quantified absolutes.

“These kinds of action are like trying to wake us up from the bardo-like dream – but the dreamlike quality is precisely what’s most real about ecological reality, so, in effect, throwing out factoids and statistics in information dump mode is making ecological experience, ecological politics and ecological philosophy utterly impossible.”

Have you ever attended an IPCC media event?

It is, of course, stories that give us frames of reference outside the raw data. *If we’re prepared to pause necessary moments and flick through them before we respond.*

Someone zings you. A hail of twitter bullets, a

short Roman sword jab intimately up under the ribs: Do you engage your Neo creation energy to pause all that psychodrama before you react and flick through your narrative Rollerdex?

Because, by checking all the usual telenovella prescribed character responses, you could do something radically creative for the future:

You could choose a reaction you’ve not seen in any of those stories.

Old stories simply help us rehearse. For this. For these moments of agency, to give us the power to bullet time our living when awareness tells us to and make one trim-tab different response, as Buckminster Fuller would put it. One seed-planting choice different to another sheeple bleat of pain.

As Rina said to me: “All this is to show that we have choice and relative power to change things we think are going badly.”

Words, after all, create worlds.

How normal is the phrase: “I can’t even imagine...” Though an interpersonal comment of kind sympathy, it betrays a profound weakness in our shared culture underneath our stories of suffering.

We can’t even fucking imagine.

Alternative narrative paths for ourselves.

Living the patterns of your place.

We are meant to be time travellers.

It’s not about you on your own, all this. It’s about you consciously in pattern with your place in a moment, as a point in a flow of moments. Are you grasping art enough yet to be comfortable with this?

“Bodies in motion, bodies at rest. Unstoppable forces and immovable objects. Big bangs. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Ah, but somewhere between action and reaction there is interaction, and that is where the fun lies, see?”

In this way, in this spirit of creation, suggests Tysonn Yunkaporta, “dynamic systems of culture evolve over time through these interactions.”

You’re not “meant” to be studying yoga, kung fu or Jungian archetypes in order to be able to raindance new weather and call yourself a wizard. You’re meant to be so much more aware of your place in the patterns of life moving around you that you have a better idea of the consequences of summoning cloudbursts.

You’re not “meant” to be taking ayahuasca in South America to glimpse the cosmos for the first time, you’re meant to be pausing the noise and closing the calendar and stepping off the concrete to feel the soil under your bare feet

and just listen.

“Everything is creation, and there are always patterns to perceive.”

Very interestingly, Tyson says that in the home language of his family there is no direct word for “Culture”. The nearest approximation of it means, he says: “be like your place.”

The consequences of this are that you will become more and more fine with... changing. With not just understanding how things connect around you, but allowing the movement in those connections to move you, shape you, bend your boundaries, change your language.

If, over the coming decades, we can rebalance the conversation between pillaged indigenous knowledges, practices, ways of being like place, with what we’re left to manage of the settler machine thinking of globalisation, we may find the beginnings of a redemptive new way of seeing emerge.

Beyond the active certainty of modernism, beyond the passive uncertainty of post-modernism, may emerge the active openness of *metamodernism*.

And artists might be shamans to help us see it.

Which now means you, dummy. If you’re this far into this funny little book, you’re already on the shamanic way.

Metaxis: Resurrection.

In the final episode of British historic comedy series *Blackadder II: The Elizabethan sitcom*, entitled *Chains*, two figures are sitting on the floor of a Spanish Inquisition prison cell, chained back to back. Lord Melchett and Edmund Blackadder himself, abducted directly from the court of the Queen of England.

“As private parts to the gods are we, they play

with us for their sport” whines Melchett, sat miserably facing the door.

As the script puts it, the door flies open and an obvious torturer rushes in.

“Oh God, who’s that?” says Blackadder, unable to see behind him. The torturer, meanwhile, leans towards Melchett with a torture instrument.

“Ti pripara para interrogación e suplicio” he says, menacingly.

“Now, just a minute,” interjects Blackadder, trying to see back, “if anyone’s going to be spoken to round here it’s going to be me, right? Tell him Melchett.”

“Certainly,” simpers Melchett; “Parlo con lui; no mi capo.”

Melchett and Blackadder, still chained back to back on the floor, then make a great awkward job of shuffling themselves one-eighty, to position

Edmund facing the Spanish torturer, while he just stands there waiting.

“That”s better,” says Blackadder. There is a pause as they settle.

“Now, what’s he saying?”

This is how hierarchies manage interactions all the time. By dumbly ignoring who can speak what language, and teaching all of us very few languages.

The era of transition is demanding rather different skillsets of us.

Hanzi Freinacht is a political philosopher, historian and sociologist and describes the idea of metamodernism as “the philosophy and view of life that corresponds to the digitalized, postindustrial, global age.” Which hardly gives anything away.

But it is, in essence, he implies, a way of seeing

the world that could only begin to be recognised long after Elizabethan economics had turned globalising warships and human cargo vessels into data synapses in an everyday world-wide digital web. Only once we'd opened Pandora's shipping container and redefined ourselves as a networked species.

"It is a worldview which combines the modern faith in progress with the postmodern critique."

"What you get then, is a view of reality in which people are on a long, complex developmental journey towards greater complexity and existential depth" he goes on. "The metamodern philosophy is a whole world of ideas and suppositions that are counter-intuitive to modern and postmodern people alike."

But what does this really mean? And how is it connected to any of our behaviours of art?

Modernism was an idea, I think, of total control.

That was its implication, especially in the heady over confidence of empire. Post modernism was, of course the disallusionment with this. A massive resignation.

Metamodernism is the acknowledging of both these stories we think we're in, and a realisation that we are instinctively beginning to put them together – indeed that doing so may prove a way out of our crises psychologically that both previous zetjeists produced, and so could never fix on their own.

As Luke Turner puts it: "Metamodernism considers that our era is characterised by an oscillation between aspects of both modernism and postmodernism."

He describes it nicely as: "a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism, a moderate fanaticism, oscillating between sincerity and irony, deconstruction and construction, apathy and affect, attempting to attain some sort of transcendent position."

It's interesting that you are already happily ignoring the prefix meta as more techgasm corporate guff, so used has it been in since the 20s began. But, a bit like greenwashing, it can be interesting to note what ideas normal business entities feel they should be trying to project.

The root reference is the word *metaxis*, used by Plato in his *Symposium*. It refers, interestingly, to a transition between worlds – the inbetweeness of that experience.

It's a state of being for the human generally, you could say. And you'd be saying it with just about every religious scholar, mystical thinker and philosophical writer since indigenous times. As *After The Future* puts it: "is a structural characteristic of the human condition--we humans are suspended on a web of polarities--the one and the many, eternity and time, freedom and fate, instinct and intellect, risk and safety, love and hate..."

But it resonates for us now in a new way, doesn't

it? In our era of transition. A time where states of human being like transexuality seem to be taking on a new symbolic state among us.

So I find it interesting for you and me, here in this particular book, that Plato's exploration of our yearning to achieve transcendence should have gifted us an era-defining word through the words of a particular character.

Diotima of Mantinea.

A priestess. And a foreigner.

There is an implication of something else very now, in Plato's exploration of this too, the idea of context – that even media-defeating oral traditions of storytelling land differently in different ears. Who we are with each other is different to who we are with other each others, as we've seen complexity explorer Nora Bateson suggests often.

But in a world of energy and vibrations,

the implication that we might oscillate at the threshold, dipping in and out of worlds constantly, is intriguing and poetic. That one of the founding voices of modern rationalism sends us a priestess, a shaman, to help us understand this brings us home to the point of this book.

I can't help feeling it is artists who can stand at the revolving door, helping people understand the oscillation and it's energy.

It was supposedly Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker who first coined the term in their 2010 essay: *Notes on metamodernism* and they point to artists as the first swallows of this philosophical spring:

“We argue that the metamodern is most clearly expressed by the neoromantic turn of late associated with the architecture of Herzog & de Meuron, the installations of Bas Jan Ader, the collages of David Thorpe, the paintings of Kaye Donachie, and the films of Michel Gondry.”

As we've learned, thinking like an artist

pulls together perception of inner truth and surrounding patterns to notice some implications and help people see them. It really is a bit priestly, when expertly practiced; it has to be empathetic but knowledgeable, pragmatic but faithful.

It's just, we are all meant to be priests now – that's the implication.

As another dear creative mate, artist and explorer of sacred women's wisdom Hazel Evans, sees it, we all have the forces of creation and recreation within us – as essential a part of being human as anything. But as a person particularly inspired to live a whole life of art, she sees her role, her job, is to inspire the forces of creation in others.

Encourage them to go into the inner landscapes of their lives and explore the story they think they're in – precisely so they can come out again with fresh eyes.

“When we connect into our innate source of

inspiration, we tune into the universe” she says, for it is: “a web of infinite expression”.

We’ve been thousands of years used to priestly classes interceding for us to the gods. We grew tired of their tyranny and threw them over for a sense of our own personal enlightenment. This has become a burden overwhelming to us because we were told we had to do it alone.

The great awakening is to the need for each of us to own the story we think we’re in and co-create it with the stories around us.

It’s interesting that this involves the at least romantic invocation of spirituality, starved of it as we’ve been. Which may be dangerous to the power of logic – but logic, engineering, science uncontextualised from the healthy web of life has, I think, created the life crash we’re living in now.

It might be a leap for you to agree with the Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr here, but

hold on to your openness to the sheer scale of reality, I think he makes a powerful statement when he says:

“Without the ultrarational hopes and passions of religion no society will ever have the courage to conquer despair and attempt the impossible; for the vision of a just society is an impossible one, which can be approximated only by those who do not regard it as impossible.”

Like it or not, what we’ll need, to make a difference in the era of crisis, is faith. And a sense of place the universe.

PRACTICING THE HOPEYCHANGEY BIT: Plan a pilgrimage.

You might expect an artist to tell you to go get high, here.

The overview effect certainly is helpful, as everyone who's been into space will tell you – the seeing our pale blue dot from even low earth orbit, that close, still shows you how incredible fragile and small and unlikely and stunningly, heartbreakingly, ineffably, gloriously, fleetingly beautiful our richly shared home world is.

But even getting to the top of a mountain might not fit your weekend plans here.

I'd take a leaf from Hazel Evans' book here, and consider a pilgrimage.

Back in 2015, she took some weeks off to walk the Camino de Santiago in Spain. Not because of a specific Christian history, but with a sense that there are some trails that people have walked for enlightenment for centuries, that might help you resonate with meaning in some way that will take you out of your usual trails of thinking.

There is a book in the principles of this. The key one being that the destination is not the most significant thing, it's the journey.

Keep it together, self-help cynic.

As anyone indigenous might tell you, it's the weeks of walking the terrain, being in the land, moving yourself through place that changes your own sense of where and who you are in space and time.

I want you simply to think about where you might do this, if you could.

It may seem a bit consumery to parachute

in and out of a pilgrimage; I don't suggest it'll trigger some sudden embrace of an indigenous understanding of life, but it might be a new start.

It's not a vacation like you're used to. It's more like a firebreak between worlds – your own bardo.

What place in the world means something to you that you've never visited?

Why does it connect to your inspiration?

How might you plan the walk, the route?

Just... listen in to this crazy idea, see what comes to you.

Maybe nothing yet. Just leave it sown as a seed in your imagination.

But if all this is oddly resonating for you, let me say welcome.

Welcome to your birthright of art.

There's just one more practice left for you.

CONFIDENCE IN MARK MAKING

“ART IS JUST
ESCAPISM.”



The first life drawing model I faced reminded me of my mother. I was sixteen. This was not the art therapy I believed I needed.

This wasn't the reason I basically failed my Art A level, however.

As the genially gifted art tutor, John, invited us to find an easel and unpack some charcoal from our art bins, and we all quietly cluttered around setting ourselves up with studious expressions and some drawing materials, the woman whom we'd be drawing took her slightly elevated position in the middle of our circle, wrapped in her robe. It was a chilly September morning in an old Victorian upper room of the local FE college, she wasn't a compulsive exhibitionist.

I kept thinking:

"It's fine. She doesn't look like my mother. It's fine. This is all fine and natural. Nudity is natural. This is art. I'm cool. I'm an adult now. Art. Nudity. Sure. *Mum*. Stoppit! Oh, God she's about to remove her robe. Keep it together, dickhead. THIS IS FINE AND I'M FINE."

She removed her robe and it was fine. It was the human body.

Curving, folding, shaped by constant movement, even when still, finding every way possible to keep moving towards Earth.

And just like that, hormonal, sixteen year-old me had taken a step into a new world. A world of normal human bodies. And not acting like a dickhead around the most basic truth of us, that we are born without clothes.

Evidently a world not inhabited by NASA when they were finalising the Gold Disks for the Voyager probes, the fuss they made about showing representations of human bodies not

wearing sensible slacks in front of aliens. Maybe this is why they spend so much time trying to *leave* Earth?

I made no fuss that day. Just mentally clicked straight into it. Thanks to the context of art, and quite possibly a childhood infused with the practical unglamours of theatre. Plus the more immediately distracting problem of discovering I couldn't draw.

It might be tempting to join imaginary dots and say this revelation is why I spent so much time subsequently trying to get out of life drawing classes. As a kid who most seemed to enjoy drawing and making little cartoon booklets, It was uncomfortable finding out fast that becoming a great cartoonist or illustrator might involve some practice and an innate flare with marks I didn't possess to professional enough degrees. I wasn't going to become Condor Man after all.

What was it *Peanuts* creator Charles M. Schulz

said of Bill Watterson in an introduction to a *Calvin and Hobbes* anthology? “Bill draws a nice bedside table.”

You can spot passion in the details. It shows as unselfconscious confidence where it seems not to matter.

Pigs and flying.

If I scraped only an E on my one-year art A-level course after that first life drawing lesson, I think it had more to do with where my joy was, than fear of failure. I think. Because you are shrewd, and also because it is obvious, it MAY have had something to do with having to make an effort at something rather than just turn up and be great. Certainly my joy then wasn't in plodding through the essentials of anatomy representation and mark making. How I got into art college after that, I'll never know.

I then nearly got thrown out of art college.

The less than bubbly deputy course leader on the Graphic Design OND at Bournemouth & Poole College of Art & Design had me in his office asking me something or other about not doing the work. Which also does, yes, look circumstantially quite damning in the whole case of the people vs Timo Peach's entitled laziness.

But ACTUALLY, I was trying to bunk out of life drawing classes and not doing great on my core projects for two significant reasons.

1: I had just fallen in love with making music.

2: I was scared of graphic design.

Standing there, being rather uncharacteristically told off in this deputy course leader's office – with hindsight, m a y b e a leetle bit for being funny and carefree seeming as well as for being a bit rubbish at creativity and drawing – the deputy course leader said to me:

“You've got to decide what you want: To be a

musician or to be on this course learning to be a designer.”

Talk about sliding doors moments in the narrative, eh.

“Yes yes,” I blurted, “I want to be here” – I didn’t know what else to do, I had no plan for dropping out, not being a drop-out kind of kid, and I needed the money from a good job for synths – “I just have *one* more gig to do and then I’m on it...”

This didn’t break his apparent personal resolve to never smile.

“Well, you’ll have to show you mean it” he might have said.

And then I think I let something else just sort of slip out.

“I also don’t think I’m a graphic designer.”

He pulled out a piece of my work. Carefully letrasetted typography forming a fictitious magazine cover. He dropped it on the desk in front of me.

“Anyone who can do this is a graphic designer” he said.

It was a shock to my confidence. In that it slapped me with some.

A year or more later, I was in the process of facing being thrown off my degree course.

Now, look, I realise that this developing Art School Failure story is beginning to sound far fetchedly rebellious and credible, told like this, but I can’t emphasise enough how obviously not one of the talented cool art school kids I ever was, nor how much of a sensible sausage I’ve always been. I just hadn’t found some less cringy emotional maturity yet. Not in the marks I was making at art school anyway.

I was facing a fail after term one at Polytechnic because I was still dithering around on the surface of things. I hadn't gotten angry. Or passionately nerdy. Not about life drawing, certainly.

Then one morning, I attended a life drawing lesson that I have been referencing ever since.

We were all sitting around on our donkey easels, scratching away at possibly the model we often used at Leicester Poly who we swear had a head slightly larger than normal proportions, when the tutor, Ian, stopped us all and rolled out a blackboard into the middle of the class.

"I'm seeing a lot of you doing the same thing here," he said, "and I want you to grasp this basic principle."

He raised the chalk to the black surface and began to draw some nervous lines.

"Say you were drawing a pig" he said. "You

would probably start to sketch around the essential outline..." he sketched around a hatchy outline of a pig as he spoke, "...its little curly ears, its nose..." he scribbled and scratched around the shape, "...until you had some approximation of a pig."

He stood back.

"And, y'know, it looks kind of like a pig."

He looked at us.

"But look at it."

We all blinked.

"It's got no life! It doesn't have the energy, the weight, the movement of a pig."

He lunged into the marks, cutting big sweeping lines in single gestures into the form.

"Get that essential line of it in there, work into its

heaviness, its *presence*...”

He swooped and dug. The chalk flew. He went over and over some of the lines.

“And if the confident line you make is wrong, just draw it again over the top – get in amongst it.”

He stood back. The pig looked three dimensional and characterful.

“NOW it’s a pig” he declared calmly.

He looked back at us.

“Don’t be scared of it. Put yourself into it.”

We all ripped off the papers in front of us and attacked fresh sheets.

“NOW you’re getting it...” he began to say, ten minutes later, walking amongst us.

The last thing a good artist is is timid.

Confidence boot camp.

It’s a lesson I have quoted ever since – confident mark making. And it’s a principle I can read into deeper than tutor Ian said in the room that day.

A number of art thinking principles come together in the most essential bit of your work as an artist, where your charcoal touches paper.

Embodiment, connected perspective, learning by doing – whether you are philosophical in the way you think about what you are doing or not, when drawing something, you do have to feel the flow of what you’re looking at and of its connection to your own movement. In a way, your own being.

But there is a principle bound up in the practice of art school that builds such confidence of mark making. It’s not simply drilling – practice. It’s an experience around it that Caroline said to me years later, managing her own anxieties in work, she wished she’d had at university.

I am talking of the ruthless tyranny of the crit.

Wherever you are in your work, when the crit lands you have to put that work on the wall for every other chump in the room to reckon with.

It's a moment offering no creative place to hide. An excuse-peppered naked reveal of your thinking. A potential public lambasting of your obvious lack of talent, the tutor's chance to fud a few daggers into your bum-faced simpletonry. Dear God, it could be painful.

But it was not like being attacked with the mental health disemboweling cutlasses of theatre critics. This was not a sniper's bullet, but the bark of a parade ground sergeant's training, and it could toughen you up.

It gets you out of your own head quickly. And in a room full of fellow art pilgrims, you should find enough sympathy to at least thank you for taking the bullet for everyone else's student union-soaked lack of work.

It's a proving ground that any good agency would use. In the hands of tutors not on little fifiedom missions trying to get off with some of the A-graders, it's a good way to find what works and learn more fearless testing.

In my own art school experience, I went on to geek out about typography and information design a bit, exploring with increasing confidence and graduating with, technically, a first in my core subject. A respectable 2:1 when my essays about evolution and Star Trek were taken into account.

But I knew as I was learning these things that the creative principles applied to everything creative, not just graphic design. Most especially that area of creativity I was most excited to apply them to, in which I'd immediately found some weird, fledgling innate confidence.

Music.

If you never feel like you know what you're doing,

is it because you haven't found the thing that lights you up to get in amongst without being told?

Flow with it.

Flow state. It's working unconscious of anything other than what you're doing. It may be the practice of art we most immediately picture in all our archetypal expressions of the artist.

I get most flow state in the studio, producing a piece of music. Then on stage, performing. If I've practiced enough.

When you're passionate, you flow into the task with some innate confidence and purpose – the sort that radiates leadership.

And this is my ultimate point, in all the ideas of this book. Practicing all the behaviours of art is going to turn you into a kind of leader. One with more useful abilities than someone pushed

through standard business school, or a law degree.

For one thing, an artist just believes that they are one. And that is instant brand enough to make a plausible start.

Confidence is the only way to create well.

Inspiration may strike, but confidence is built. It's a germ of truth in you like a gift that you have to grow, flex, strengthen, engage with. The greatest artists had to work into their flow, find their voice, and wrestle with their doubts. Art school boot camp helps you grow up in all this. Take a punch.

This is what we need to do with our futures.

This is what you need to do with yours.

PRACTICING THE HOPEYCHANGEY BIT: Throw a crit party.

I'll be surprised if you do this. But I do want to see the pictures.

My suggestion is to set yourself a little progress exercise – to literally progress a creative idea through a couple of iterations with a handful of trusted artistic friends.

Start with your passion, so you're not flying blind – I say don't attempt a whole new type of work you've had no previous interest in, but go for something you've been noodling about with in your head. Wanting to begin. A bit afraid to, or unsure to.

Simply make a start on it and imagine a little

deadline of having to share it with some mates over a glass of something and some nibbles.

Take the punches. Simply listen, hold in storming from the room or throwing your head back and bawling and note the different takes on what you've done. Stay in your creative transition space and gather up the perspectives.

Then go back into the work on another day. What does it feel like, look like, sound like to you now?

Was the criticism valid?

Was it missing the point?

What does your confidence say?

What does your emotional truth say?

What does the excitement in your stomach say?

Are you already realising the world is yours to change as only you can?

CONCLUSION

As Neil Gaiman puts it: “In the war of ideas, art always wins in the end.”

It’s a quote that cheerily acknowledges that art is going into battle with pain.

Lostness and trauma, fear and abuse, ignorance and truly bloody terrible habits. And perhaps above all, despair.

These things are naked in times of crisis.

But if you’ve been through an art school crit, you know that naked is nothing now.

An artist like Hilary Mantell, a writer capable of bringing alive history with vivid precision yet haunting emotional reality, happened to suffer a lot physically. Illness and surgeries and goodness

knows, but I'm not sure if she would describe art as her way of coping with that. It seems more like something she had to choose to do anyway. As she told Olivia Laing:

"Nevertheless, and despite and even though – those were my watchwords."

It may be therapy sometimes, it may be compulsion. It may be testimony, it may be simply testing. It may be fun it may be painful. But art is always a choice. Always available to you.

And when you choose art, it never stays with just you. It always changes the world around you.

During the cold war, in the typical human way of instinctively adapting to anything, young creatives starved of the open right to enjoy Western popular music devised their own pastiches and copies thereof. A treasuretrove of charming, furtive but bold interpretations of pop culture sounds they were denied, and a

wonderful cultural testimony to the mutability of history.

Because even knock-offs of Beatles songs from behind the iron curtain can become something oddly moving, as well as still a bit ridiculous, in the history of just one country that's been through a lot to find a bold creative future for itself. Such things are cultural markers, little tattoos of meaning, in the memory of the people who speak Polish, remaining long after the living memories have gone. Speaking truth from the dead.

A collective embracing of shadows.

Many people, of course, embrace their own shadows with ink. Literally and figuratively take the bodily scars of their stories and embellish them, tattooing those hard-won stripes into something beautiful. Even decorative.

Creating a whole new way of seeing what's shaped them.

As we dare to look forward, of course the truth is, there is no single new story of us to be created. The future will be a rich plurality of futures, of human stories winding us together. But I wonder, if we find ourselves around the campfire together, seeking a little comfort, a little distraction, a little hope... what story will you want to share?

That ancient arena in Verona, back in my earlier chapter, it was once a place of bodily bloodshed, drama, death and politics. And now... well, thanks to art, even seats of ancient global power can be politely been gentrified into stony seats of contemplation and more lofty entertainment.

I wonder, what will meet the emotional truths of human audiences in the millennia to come? And what will their voices want to sing?

When it's you down there on the red splashed floor of the arena, with everyone watching and no one watching, spotlights or lion gates rising, your very life at stake as you face fate, you may feel like you've not been thrown into all this with

much. And you haven't, when you boil it down to simplify your fearsome reality.

All you've got is the whole world in your head and your life in your hands.

Your job is to make something of it.

x

**Timo Peach,
May 2022.**

