

Animal to Animal

The physiological processes of seeing, hearing, feeling and tasting are astounding. That the human species has finessed these senses to transmit such complex animal to animal communication is a miracle. Take conversation for instance. Through expulsions of breath from our lungs, shaped by our mouth, larynx, lips and tongue, we create pulses of air pressure that traverse distances greater than our body's reach, which in turn, funnelled and captured by the outer ear, gently vibrate the internal auditory organs translating motion into electrical signals to be deciphered by the recipient human brain - a stream of communicated thought from human to human. Through the abstract formation of spoken language, mediated via the production and reception of sound, we transmit instructions, observations, agreement, disagreement, propositions, conjecture, logic, nuance, love, affection, reassurance. We communicate to one another the thoughts that gestate in our minds.

Consider the mute, blind, deaf, unfeeling object. Unable to reach out, unaware of other objects, which might themselves be mute, blind, deaf and unfeeling. Ediacara¹, the first complex cellular structures to transition from plant to animal form were just that. Referred to by palaeontologists as 'enigmatic' these extremely early organisms swayed through a prehistoric ocean unaware of the light, sound, odour and tactility of the infant Earth. They multiplied without sensing their proximity to each other.

How utterly incredible it is to consider the transition over millions of years from sensationless entities, to the interconnected, cognisant and social beings that animals have become. The ability to communicate has been intrinsic to the success of *homo sapiens* and emmeshed with that is the socially cohesive purpose of art - expressions of awareness of self and of others. Art communicates the past, the present and enables us to share our imagined futures.

Perhaps because we have an awareness of the past and can imagine our future, we strive to go beyond the limits of our senses and communicate further than our tangible realm. The innate motivation to communicate with omnipotent forces is expressed through ritual, belief, religion. In order to communicate beyond the here and now, we engage in extra-sensory methods; prayer, trance, séance, psychotropic drugs. We need to believe in something greater and desire to communicate with it. We launch probes that go beyond our solar system and listen for alien communication with our technology and our dreaming. Whilst we wait for signs of these entities that operate beyond our senses, we materialise their forms through art and commune through those artefacts.

Technology has enabled human communication to transcend the physiological limits of our senses: detecting, transmitting, receiving, decoding and amplifying at levels beyond our physical capability. The computing capacity of digital technology has enabled us to create virtual worlds within which communication is vicarious, experienced in digital space and through avatars. Our intelligence has engendered incredible technology that augments our human senses and accelerates our communication. And then there is machine

communication – machine to machine, artificial intelligence and synthetic emotion. Although born out of human minds, these are the areas of science that give rise to ethical questions of existential magnitude.

Art and its visionary communication is central to human evolution. It has been the materialisation of imagination and endeavour; an orientation that has led us to a technologically exalted era. Contemporary art and creativity remain central to our present and our future and within that, contemporary artists take on a pioneering role. We need artists to keep our senses wide awake, to communicate the realm of the possible and to be critical of the ethically unthinkable. And so it follows that we need new artists, students of the arts, to maintain fresh, challenging, intuitive and original thinking.

Contemporary artists have, perhaps out of necessity in a challenging climate, become adept at communicating in manifold ways. They are writers of essays, reviews, statements, applications, evaluations, manuals and books. Artists are also orators: talking about their work or the work of other artists, presenting opinion, knowledge and reason through lectures, teaching, gallery talks, radio and television broadcasts. Artists promote their work through marketing methods, social media, graphic communication and networking. These are necessary skills for a sustained practice as an artist. The contemporary practitioner must be capable of communicating in all of these ways. Students of art must embrace this. They must learn the power of dialogue, of visual language, of coercion. It isn't always easy and may not come naturally, but in tandem with creative exploration and the triumphs of making things comes the gamut of professional skills that extend and communicate the complete context of their art.

Should the art speak for itself? Not always. Within the complex, technological interconnectedness of the 21st Century, many artworks rightly demand from their viewer a greater reading and richer frame of reference. In this new age, where knowledge and communication are currency, artworks cannot afford to be mute, blind, deaf or unfeeling objects.

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¹ Tubular and frond-shaped multicellular organisms from the Ediacaran period 575 million years ago.