

## **The preservation of original thought, through act of refusal.**

“When did the gaze collapse... Was it ten years, fifteen years, or even fifty years ago, before television?” Jean-Luc Goddard, *In Praise of Love*, 2001<sup>1</sup>

Susan Sontag quoting Nietzsche: “Our pre-eminence: we live in the age of comparison, we can verify as has never been verified before... we enjoy differently, we suffer differently: our instinctive ability is to compare an unheard number of things”. *The Aesthetics of Silence*, 1966<sup>2</sup>

**In our current epoch**, for an artist to see or experience in any original manner, requires a certain withdrawal. The enormous quantity of visual and interactive noise that litters our present, can be a constraint to both originality and perception. Without personally enforcing a strict disconnect, few parts of our day or night remain free from an inundation of communications, social media, marketing and technology. It has been posited that to resist this edifice of capitalism that limits our ‘gaze’, is to reintroduce spontaneity, substance, diversity and meaning.<sup>3</sup> The way we see and think, critically and creatively, is determined by the process of discerning our internal imagery from the extraneous external stimulus flooding our minds, for “what is the source of the visual messages that you receive, if they are not formed from sensations deposited in the memory.”<sup>4</sup> The current artist must engage with the society they inhabit, yet simultaneously disengage or withdrawal sufficiently, to allow perceptual independence. This deferral from the “daily routines and operations of the new knowledge worker... to those of an artist,”<sup>5</sup> is to allow the artist perspective to critique those same structures that current art closely interacts with.

Society’s increasing connectedness, the constant exchange with digital technologies, exacerbates our already ‘time-poor condition.’ Thus, it is increasingly difficult to withdrawal to a space that allows enough freedom or ‘silence’ to create. Our memories have become a dumping ground for a plethora of useless bits of imagery and other information detritus that cram our consciousness. From a myriad of often unimportant sources; emails, Facebook, advertising spam, and ‘fake news’ inundate our inboxes. This constant deluge of the superfluous has resulted in the depletion of the very singularity of the image. Historically, there has never been so many disposable images archived and in such unfathomable quantity, “(m)ore and more, the history of mankind is being constructed, conceived, and understood through images, people being, as it were, in the image of the history of their images.”<sup>6</sup> A

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<sup>1</sup> Crary, Jonathan. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, (London: Verso, 2013) 34.

<sup>2</sup> Sontag, Susan. “*The Aesthetics of Silence*,” *Styles of Radical Will*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1969) 15.

<sup>3</sup> “I am nonetheless convinced that our imagination cannot be anything *but* anthropomorphic.” Calvino, Italo. “*Visibility*.” *In Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988) 90.

<sup>4</sup> Calvino, Italo. “*Visibility*.” *In Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, 82.

<sup>5</sup> Gillick, Liam. “*The good of work*.” *In Keine Zeit. (Busy) Exhausted Self / Unlimited Ability*, ed. Agnes Husslein-Arco and Bettina Steinbrügge, (Köln: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012)

<sup>6</sup> Lageira, Jacinto. “*Tempus fugit*,” *Between Times – Instants, intervals, durations*, (Madrid: La Fabrica, 2010) 24.

daunting paradigm is thus perpetuated, where junk imagery mixes with our very perception and memory, where unrelated experiences become homogenised into a network of same experiences.

The endgame promise of ever newer, seamless technology, propelling us towards a future utopian existence of ultra-convenience, is an unfulfillable quest. Neo-capitalism inherently builds redundancy into new products to fuel ever more consumption. Our civil requirement is to be constantly adapting to new technology interfaces and updates. We either embrace this future, a virtual job description of connectivity and digital engagement, or be bypassed. Jonathan Crary argues that “real life activities that do not have an online correlate begin to atrophy, or cease to be relevant,”<sup>7</sup> A situation which could result in the non-digital or analogue entity being relegated to an outsider to be ignored. Modernity’s intrusion into our privacy, our non-work time, our sleep, and our imaginations is calculating and limitless. Globalisation has brought many benefits to inhabitants at the winning end of western capitalism, with advantages such as cheap goods, high wages, extended life expectancy and fast internet, but at what cost? When we Google online or shop in a department store, our eye movement and selection patterns are recorded into algorithms that echo back to us as a feed-back loop of our activities, “collaborating in one’s own surveillance,”<sup>8</sup> thus limiting our future scope of reference. Has our triumph in achieving these life conveniences been at the cost of losing our capacity for original thought, our decision making?<sup>9</sup> The more we commit to working for the ever-hungry machine of capitalism with its 24/7 engagement, the more we risk relinquishing the traits of what it means to be truly human. Time itself is the greatest casualty in this contemporary paradigm; time for sleep, family, contemplation and subsequently creative and original thinking. To counter this divorce from our natural state is to resist or withdraw, to find silence. This active resistance, the act of refusal, the strike, to slow down, is to preserve and enhance this capacity.

## Humanity’s Entrenchment

In 1782 Joseph Wright of Derby painted *Arkwright’s Cotton Mills by Night*. This work is often cited to illustrate the dawn of industrialisation in rural England, even though it was many decades later before the true effect was felt among the working masses. This image is a harbinger of change in what was to befall the world once it came to be in the grips of full-blown capitalism. Not only is the building, depicted in its pretty rural setting, an industrial structure without precedent, but it shows almost for the first time in history a nocturnal scene where a factory is lit by gaslight so that work continues on a 24-hour cycle. By its startling

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<sup>7</sup> Crary, Jonathan. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, (London: Verso, 2013) 59.

<sup>8</sup> Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, 48.

<sup>9</sup> The future brings further risks to human autonomy and perceptual clarity, with entrepreneurs like Tesla’s Elon Musk, following a trans-humanist sentiment, is pouring enormous resources into new company projects like “Neuralink,” a brain computer interface. The product, called Neural lace will, by Musk’s account, “head off AI (artificial intelligence) Armageddon by plugging us in to evolving machine intelligence and keeping us ahead of the game,” preventing humanity from being relegated to house cats, which in Musk’s words, “(a) house cat’s a good outcome by the way.” Biegler, Paul, “*Elon Musk wants to upgrade your Brain.*” *The Age*, May 21, 2017, 24-25.

appearance in an otherwise darkened landscape it announces, “the rationalised deployment of an abstract relation between time and work, severed from the cyclical temporalities of lunar and solar movements.”<sup>10</sup> The implications of this pivotal moment in history had far reaching effects for human labour. The relationship between time and work was radically reconceptualised, pre-posing a situation whereby a profit driven enterprise can generate work non-stop around the clock, regardless of the natural circadian rhythms of a human being. Once this industrialisation became the status quo across the western hemisphere for hundreds of thousands of working people, the impacts on the work life balance quickly began to take effect. Free time, or leisure time became more and more precious. With mass production, time and time saving is the principal requirement for generating business profit, but its commoditisation also represented the greatest loss to civil liberty. The institutionalisation of round the clock shift-work entrenched the life of a human being as a machine, devoid of variance, natural cycles or ritual. Thankless hours on the production line with little to no regulation meant that what time you had left from work, was time to sleep, the last bastion of individual freedom that has yet to be fully infiltrated. “Sleep is an irrational and intolerable affirmation that there might be limits to the compatibility of living beings with the allegedly irresistible forces of modernisation.”<sup>11</sup>

## Refusal

To abstain from the obligation and societal pressure of constant engagement with work, is a refusal. In Herman Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, (first published in serialised form in 1853 and then in book form in 1856), the central character Bartleby is conceived as a symbol of a demoralised and overworked humanity. Before entering the employment of scrivener in a legal firm, his spirit had been broken by his previous occupation, of working at the Dead Letter Office at Washington, “continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames.”<sup>12</sup> This task of sorting and disposing a never-ending supply of the written word, only to enter his new employment condemning him to the life of a human writing machine, led to Bartleby striking.

The likelihood of rebellion was not at all apparent when Bartleby first started as scrivener, where “Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing...He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light.”<sup>13</sup> So when Bartleby arrived at his point of refusal, a breaking point, in a snap moment, his actions were not of violent insurrection, but a stance where “Bartleby in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, ‘I would prefer not to.’”<sup>14</sup> In the story, Bartleby becomes both the signifier of dissent and an agent of change, where his behaviour causes a ripple effect in the lives of his colleagues through his non-aggressive confrontation.

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<sup>10</sup> Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, 13

<sup>12</sup> Melville, Herman. *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856) 22. Accessed May 27, 2017. [www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/11231/pg11231-images.html](http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/11231/pg11231-images.html)

<sup>13</sup> Melville, *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Melville, *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, 5.

The support characters in the story are forced to observe the human condition in its most miserable of declines that is laid bare before them. Bartleby's refusal, knows no end, to the extent that it consumes his will for life, a complete withdrawal. His employer showing pity upon the scrivener in his hapless state, searches for a meaning in Bartleby's suffering, and that (he) "might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach."<sup>15</sup> .

Paul Lafarge, a socialist Marxist writer, picked up on this theme of capitalism's abuse upon humanity, and highlighted the necessity for liberty and natural justice, a return to "natural instincts," when he wrote the treatise *The Right To Be Lazy*, in 1883. Lafargue argued that the working masses had sacrificed themselves to the service of the capitalists, that the more they worked, the less capable of further work they became, "absorbed and brutalised by this single vice they are no longer men but pieces of men, that they kill within themselves all beautiful faculties, to leave nothing alive and flourishing except the furious madness for work."<sup>16</sup> The industrial revolution was sold to the working poor as a benefit to their livelihoods, instead of as the vehicle of profit generation for the wealthy. LaFrague critiqued how defrauded the population had been in 1848, in even considering that in defending new terms of employment of limiting factory work to 12 hours a day, that this was a victory, a 'revolutionary principle.'

"Shame upon the French proletariat! Slaves only are capable of such humiliation. Twenty years of capitalist civilisation would have been necessary to make such a humiliation conceivable to a Greek of ancient times! And if the sufferings resulting from compulsory work have closed upon the proletariat, more numerous than the locusts of the bible, it is the proletariat itself who have conjured them up."<sup>17</sup>

The Bartleby example is used to great effect by the contemporary artist collective, Claire Fontaine. In 'her' 2005 work *Strike*, Claire Fontaine members James Thornhill and Fulvia Carnevale call for a "human strike," which at its core, doesn't call for what one would imagine as being industrial action, but "stands for a refusal vis-à-vis the constant readiness for self-realisation and expenditure, not only in the domain of work but in all areas of life."<sup>18</sup> It is "a strike that attacks the economic, affective, sexual, and emotional positions within which subjects are imprisoned."<sup>19</sup> The work itself is neon tubing, spelling out the word *STRIKE*, but only illuminates, by way of motion detector, when there is an absence of activity. The notion of a 'human strike' as a movement, has the potential to infect any human, at the very foundations of our routine life and our individuality. In the exhibition "Inhibitions" Claire

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<sup>15</sup> Melville, *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, 11.

<sup>16</sup> LaFargue, Paul. *The Right To Be Lazy*, 1883, 12. Accessed May 22, 2017. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/category/author/paul-lafargue>

<sup>17</sup> LaFargue, Paul. *The Right To Be Lazy*, 1883, 4. Accessed May 22, 2017. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/category/author/paul-lafargue>

<sup>18</sup> Aichner, Véronique, Bettina Steinbrügge. "The institutions of the self," In *Keine Zeit. (Busy) Exhausted Self / Unlimited Ability*, ed. Agnes Husslein-Arco and Bettina Steinbrügge, (Köln: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012) 22.

<sup>19</sup> Müller, Vanessa Joan, Christina Ricupero. *New Ways of doing Nothing*, (Vienna: Sternberg Press / Kunsthalle Wien, 2016) 22.

Fontaine produced a text based work called *Human strike has already begun*, in which one section reads, “Adopting a behaviour that doesn’t correspond to what others tell us about ourselves is the first step of human strike.”<sup>20</sup> In another work, shown at the 2009 Art Basel Miami Beach Art Projects, Claire Fontaine installed another neon sign in red, white and blue proclaiming *Capitalism Kills Love*. Their explanation that “love, real love, can only be communist, and that’s why love is not fully possible in our society,”<sup>21</sup> further questions the individual’s capacity for a full range of emotional expression, given the circumstances of our current neo-capitalist existence.

Claire Fontaine produced a series of subversive sculptural pieces called *Master key* consisting of lock picks, hacksaws and Allen keys that references their ultimate ‘refusal’ work, the book *Instructions for the sharing of Private property*. Each work is titled by the location of a potential breaking and entering, such as *Paris10ème*, inviting a collusion in misbehaviour between artist, consumer and lock picker. Of course, crossing this societal boundary of advocating theft is an anti-capitalist act, by which the artist makes no apology, albeit a generous serving of subversive wit.<sup>22</sup> Claire Fontaine’s book conspicuously has the appearance of the CIA pamphlet *Freedom Fighter’s Manual*, airdropped over Nicaragua with the “stated aim of ‘liberating’ that country from oppression and misery... of the traitorous Marxist state,”<sup>23</sup> by encouraging simple actions like threatening employers, cause liquid spills and improvised bomb making. The book also evokes Duchamp’s ‘readymades’ with its appropriated format, and is in keeping with the artist collective’s own description as a ‘readymade artist.’ Even the name Claire Fontaine is borrowed, with ‘Claire’ being a popular brand of French note book with blank pages, and Fontaine a direct reference to Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* 1917. A world “characterised, in part, by political impotence and a ‘crises of singularities,’ or fixed identities,”<sup>24</sup> are drivers for Claire Fontaine’s practice, and it’s through the hi-jacking of signs, symbols, objects and images found in contemporary visual culture that ‘she’ confronts the notions of originality, artisanal skills and authority.

## Silence

Silence was an important development in art by being both an act of refusal and for establishing a clear pathway for the emergence of the conceptual. Silence, often seen in eastern cultures as a valued quality, had not been as appreciated in the west. *Noble Silence*, a technique practiced by Buddhist monks and nuns, is the art of refraining from speech as a method to quiet the mind and condition the body in the discipline of ‘right speech,’ to enable ‘right listening.’ Re-

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<sup>20</sup> Jovanovic, Rozalia. *Their Insurrection – Ready-made artist Claire Fontaine fuses art, politics and irony*, (Accessed May 28, 2017) [http://www.t293.it/wpcontent/files\\_mf/1329329610CLFOR17112.pdf](http://www.t293.it/wpcontent/files_mf/1329329610CLFOR17112.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Jovanovic, *Their Insurrection – Ready-made artist Claire Fontaine fuses art, politics and irony*.

<sup>22</sup> A necessary quality in escaping art’s self-consciousness, as illustrated by Susan Sontag in 1966; in questioning irony in art, that “It seems unlikely that the possibilities of continually undermining one’s assumptions can go on unfolding indefinitely into the future, without being eventually checked by despair or by a laugh that leaves one without any breath at all.” Sontag, *The Aesthetics of Silence*, 34.

<sup>23</sup> Jovanovic, *Their Insurrection – Ready-made artist Claire Fontaine fuses art, politics and irony*.

<sup>24</sup> Müller, Ricupero. *New Ways of doing Nothing*, 22.

contextualised - if a space is overcharged with trivia then our imagination is flooded and less effective. Jasper Johns, as quoted by Sontag, pronounced, “(a)lready it’s a great deal to *see* anything *clearly*, for we don’t see *anything* clearly,”<sup>25</sup> for, “it’s scarcely possible for the artist to write a word (or render an image or make a gesture) that doesn’t remind him of something already achieved.”<sup>26</sup>

The painter Robert Rauschenberg and composer John Cage pioneered explorations into this silent realm with their seminal works the *White Paintings* 1951 and *4’33”* 1952, respectively. In the art world of the early 1950s the spirit of the gestural and painterly Abstract Expressionism dominated, and the *White Paintings* proved too challenging for audiences of the time, with even critics finding the works difficult to interpret. Painted as a series of formal uniform rectangular canvases, arranged in groups of one, two, three, four and seven, they were modular, identical and a perfect featureless white. With the appearance that they were not even painted by the artist’s hand, (in fact often painted and repainted by enlisted friends in 1952-1953, including Cy Twombly), Rauschenberg “threw into turmoil the notion of an “original” painting”<sup>27</sup> remarking that “Today is their creator,”<sup>28</sup> thus proposing an “altogether different statement of faith, one centered on abdication of the concept of individual authorship.”<sup>29</sup> This was a theme pursued by theorists later in the decade, and culminating with Roland Barthes’ essay, *Death of the Author*. In this focus, art’s manifestation shifts with the observance that ‘text,’ as it stood, “is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture,”<sup>30</sup> indicating that originality is extinguished by the existence of limitless influences and that the viewer is now to be conscripted to contribute to the realisation of an artwork. The premise that the reader must now ‘order and collect’ from the multiplicity of writings, from a myriad of cultural sources, dispenses the myth that society ‘champions’ the individual artist/creator as the sole source or origin of the idea, hence “the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author.”<sup>31</sup>

Stepping into the critical vacuum of the early 1950s, Cage, who idolised master conceptualist Marcel Duchamp, enthusiastically embraced the *White Paintings*, proposing that the pristine surfaces acted as receptors for light and shadow, and in the 1953 Stable Gallery exhibition of the works, wrote a poem in tribute:

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<sup>25</sup> Sontag, *The Aesthetics of Silence*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Sontag, *The Aesthetics of Silence*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Roberts, Sarah, “*White Painting* [three panel],” *Rauschenberg Research Project*, (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: July 2013) Accessed May 29, 2017, 2. <http://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.308.A-C/essay/white-painting-three-panel/>.

<sup>28</sup> Roberts, Sarah, “*White Painting* [three panel],” *Rauschenberg Research Project*, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Roberts, Sarah, “*White Painting* [three panel],” *Rauschenberg Research Project*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Death of the Author*, 1967, 4. Translated by Richard Howard, Accessed May 26, 2017 <https://writing.upenn.edu/~taransky/Barthes.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Barthes, *Death of the Author*, 6.

“To Whom / No subject / No image / No taste / No object / No beauty / No message / No talent / No technique (no why) / No idea / No intention / No art / No object / No feeling / No black / No white (no *and*) / After careful consideration, I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing in these paintings that could not be changed, they can be seen in any light and are not destroyed by the action of shadows. / Hallelujah! the blind can see again; the water’s fine”.<sup>32</sup>

Cage, who held the belief that an artist could work freely with sound as with paint, challenged the idea of what a composer was, in the traditional craftsman-like sense. He is often regarded as a co-inventor of ‘happenings’ and performance art, and his trail blazing can be exemplified no more succinctly than with *4’33”*. Following *Black Mountain Piece*, considered the first truly sixties style ‘happening’ involving, “piano playing, poetry recitation, record-players, movie projectors, dancing, and, possibly, a barking dog,”<sup>33</sup> *4’33”* culminated as, “the still point in the sonic storm.”<sup>34</sup> The work itself, a period of allocated time, whereby the only sound heard is the opening and closing of the piano lid accompanied by the occasional sound of the audience, was shocking for the period.<sup>35</sup> Always an artist who chose the path of most resistance, *4’33”* is ultimately an assertion of will. Cage considered silence as neither the opposite of sound and music nor its absence; for him, silence “was a landscape of unintentional sounds experienced between intentional sounds; as such, it was absolutely substantive, inseparable from and interdependent with sound.”<sup>36</sup> Silence itself is not finite, and it’s presence demands the opposite to be addressed, “just as there can’t be ‘up’ without ‘down’ or ‘left’ without ‘right,’ so one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognise silence.”<sup>37</sup> The White Paintings can be appreciated in a similar way, not only as a receptive surface to be projected upon by ambient light manifestations, but “rather as provocative agents of activity and profoundly physical objects that link our actions and perceptions, making us aware of the same perceptual interdependency that was central to silence for Cage.”<sup>38</sup>

Tom Friedman’s work *1,000 Hours of Staring*, 1992-97, a sheet of plain paper measuring 82.5 x 82.5 cm, which the artist focused on for 1,000 hours without making a mark, is another investigation into the idea of emptiness and silence. The work asks, “(i)s seeing everything the same as staring at nothing but a ‘blank’ piece of paper?”<sup>39</sup> It is for Friedman, a pure form of

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<sup>32</sup> Emily Genauer, “Art and Artists: Musings on Miscellany,” *New York Herald Tribune*, December 27, 1953, As cited by Roberts, Sarah, “*White Painting* [three panel],” *Rauschenberg Research Project*, (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: July 2013) Accessed May 29, 2017. <http://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.308.A-C/essay/white-painting-three-panel/>.

<sup>33</sup> Ross, Alex. “*Searching for Silence*,” (New York: *The New Yorker* October 4, 2010) 8. Accessed May 29, 2017. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/searching-for-silence>

<sup>34</sup> Ross, *Searching for Silence*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, on the difference between the ‘lived time’ of the photographic image and music, “(t)he unfolding of a piece of music reveals something very different, however: music produces time, produces its time, and produces time by flowing with my own.” Lageira, “*Tempus fugit*,” *Between Times – Instants, intervals, durations*, 19. With cage asserting his time-frame of *4’33”*, it forces us to consider our relationship with that present moment.

<sup>36</sup> Roberts, “*White Painting* [three panel],” *Rauschenberg Research Project*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Sontag, *The Aesthetics of Silence*, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Roberts, “*White Painting* [three panel],” *Rauschenberg Research Project*, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Hainley, Bruce, Dennis Cooper, Adrian Searle. *Tom Friedman*, (London: Phaidon Press, 2001) 55.

self-portrait, as well as a social critique, questioning an existence positioning itself between everything and nothing, and allocates time the artist spent distinguishing one from the other. It's a work about silence and slowness. An appreciation of not only the time spent staring, "but all the life between the hours when the staring was done."<sup>40</sup> John Cage posed a question of Rauschenberg's motives for the White Paintings; "is when Rauschenberg looks an idea? Rather it is an entertainment in which to celebrate unfixity. [. . .] (A canvas is never empty.); it fills an empty canvas."<sup>41</sup> The same question of potentiality could be asked of Friedman; that without the careful consideration of 'nothingness', how can 'something' even arise. 'Silence' is an act of refusal, an act of excluding oneself from the 'white noise' of society and the restrictions it places on the faculty of contemplation; for "(w)ho even notices the absence of all those hours in looking at the stare on the paper? How easy it is to turn away from not just hours but years, lifetimes."<sup>42</sup>

## Slowness

Photography has followed a similar trajectory to modern industrial society, one of ever increasing speed and acceleration. The rapid shutter speed of the camera was an effective means of slicing through time to freeze individual moments in perpetuity. Sergio Mah describes the relationship of photography to time; that each image "is ontologically linked to a specific dating process: the moment in which the image was conceived in physical contiguity with its referent,"<sup>43</sup> that is, that as a photographic image comes into existence at a particular moment in time, it gives meaning to its subject by demarcating its historical moment. While Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, a Bauhaus member in the 1930s, identified 'slow seeing' as one of the eight variants of photographic technique, in the words of Henri Cartier-Bresson in 1952, photography was, "the simultaneous recognition, in the fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of precise organisation of forms that give that event its proper expression."<sup>44</sup> But the conditions by which we exist have shifted. The contemporary paradigm is now one of endless acceleration with no pause. Gaining historical perspective in a medium like photography or film requires the establishment of a "site for the experience of differential speeds and durations whose multiplicity cannot be halted with a simple pull of the emergency brake."<sup>45</sup> That the frozen time captured by the camera shutter, or the lineal nature of film fails to demonstrate the pluralistic reality of the present.

Slowing down time, is the tactic of reclaiming our understanding of place and location in contemporary art practice. Exploring these "contemporary processes of desynchronization,"<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Hainley, *Tom Friedman*, 55.

<sup>41</sup> Cage, John. "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work," (Milan: Metro, 1961) 1. Accessed May 29, 2017. <http://theoria.art-zoo.com/on-robert-rauschenberg-artist-and-his-work-john-cage/>

<sup>42</sup> Hainley, *Tom Friedman*, 56.

<sup>43</sup> Mah, Sérgio. *Between Times – Instants, intervals, durations*, (Madrid: La Fabrica, 2010) 10.

<sup>44</sup> Koepnick, Lutz. *On slowness: toward an aesthetic of the contemporary*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014) 53.

<sup>45</sup> Koepnick, *On slowness: toward an aesthetic of the contemporary*, 65.

<sup>46</sup> Koepnick, *On slowness: toward an aesthetic of the contemporary*, 72.

slowing down our seeing, expands our perception of the present. This is crucial to broadening our understanding of the relationship “between the organism and its spatiotemporal environments.”<sup>47</sup> For humans, in this age of accelerated change, to understand the “intractability of time and the folds of virtualisation within the very fabric of the present,”<sup>48</sup> is to know where we are, and how we should proceed. Two artists that have engaged with this approach of slowness in art are the photographers Hiroshi Sugimoto from Japan and Michael Wesely, Germany. In the face of rapid post-cold war advancement of global networks of communications, Sugimoto and Wesely have attempted to unravel our experience of the temporal by mapping modern time. Through the innovative use of the camera and the use of specialised film, they capture an alternate image of reality. This is a departure from previous modes of representation in that they are not taking a pregnant slice through time, nor are they harnessed to a single viewpoint. Their work enables us to experience our own open present, allowing a visualisation of the “differential speeds and durational extensions that drive modern culture underneath the veil of progress, directional haste, and traumatic discontinuity.”<sup>49</sup> Slowness, for Sugimoto and Wesely, means “to encounter the sites of modern speed and acceleration with our shutters wide open.”<sup>50</sup>

Sugimoto’s ‘theatre series,’ produced from the 1970s to the 1990s are images of a theatre’s screen for the duration of an entire movie. The settings are lavish picture theatres in Tokyo, Los Angeles and New York built between 1920 and the late 1930s, the deco architectural interiors providing a unique framing around the screen frame within each exposure. In each work, Sugimoto positions the camera in the central view, elevated as much as possible, in the rear of the auditorium. While leaving the camera shutter open for the entire duration of the film’s screening, an image is produced leaving the screen area, usually less than a fifth of the image, over exposed and mysteriously glowing, while gently illuminating the glorious interiors of the historic spaces. There are no spectators present in these images to witness the “most entrancing window of the modern distraction industry,”<sup>51</sup> nor do we know the kind of movies Sugimoto’s camera was capturing.

Sugimoto refuses societies tendency to value speed and acceleration, moving in the opposite direction to a more experiential, slow and investigative relation with time. The essence of Sugimoto’s theatre series is that time has continuous flow, allowing *satori*, which in the Zen Buddhist tradition refers to the experience of *kenshō*, seeing ones true nature or spirit. By capturing the passage of time his work allows us to perceive the unperceivable. The difficulty in discerning change in time is because time is *un-real*, “due to the fact that lived experience is neither outside this time that it seeks to circumscribe, nor located at a fixed point from which one could have a concrete vision of the time that passes, so to speak, in front of us.”<sup>52</sup> The meaning of an image is characterised by its time; hence the image can be seen as what Jacinto

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<sup>47</sup> Koepnick, *On slowness: toward an aesthetic of the contemporary*, 73.

<sup>48</sup> Koepnick, *On slowness: toward an aesthetic of the contemporary*, 74.

<sup>49</sup> Koepnick, *On slowness: toward an aesthetic of the contemporary*, 74.

<sup>50</sup> Koepnick, *On slowness: toward an aesthetic of the contemporary*, 76.

<sup>51</sup> Koepnick, *On slowness: toward an aesthetic of the contemporary*, 59.

<sup>52</sup> Lageira, Jacinto. “*Tempus fugit*,” *Between Times – Instants, intervals, durations*, (Madrid: La Fabrica, 2010) 19.

Lageira calls a ‘time object.’ The image is not only represented by its material form and represented by the time or period in which it was taken, but also the time taken for the image to be witnessed.<sup>53</sup> Slowness in art is an attempt by the artist to engage the viewer in a proposal of joint refusal; to step out of fast time, to perceive in slow time, which unlocks memory and enriches one’s aesthetic experience.

Michael Wesely, by means of his modified camera apparatus, sets out to interpret the relationship between time and place, by recording change. Contrasting the permanence of physical structures like architecture and landscape with a European population in a state of flux following the momentous political upheaval of 1989, the end of the cold war, Wesley attempts to record a past, present and future, in a way that’s appreciable or comprehensible. To achieve this seemingly impossible feat, some of his images having exposure times of up to two years, enabling a panoramic overview of the time it takes to demonstrate the physical shifts that occur in a fixed space, or the time it takes to heal the wounds of his homeland. Wesley’s images ask us to “rethink our relation to the passing of time and the geographies of our present.”<sup>54</sup> Time is constantly moving, which inhibits the placement memory in our consciousness, and therefore our understanding of history. Wesley’s work helps us to see through this fog of the present and illuminate what has transpired in a way that’s relational, and in a way that manipulates our expectation. Lageira suggests that as “with the reality effect, artists play with and foil perceptual codes, decompartmentalise reference systems, and blur time-frames, by working mainly on the distance and closeness of represented time and the time of representation.”<sup>55</sup>

Wesley’s projects have ranged from long exposures of German, European and South American soccer stadiums, the Potsdamer Platz reconstruction in former East Berlin, to the ‘railway station series’ of the early 1990s. In the latter project, focusing on German, Austrian and Eastern European train stations, Wesley, in his signature way, employs the open shutter photographic technique. What is unusual in these images of what are normally busy transport hubs, is the minimal presence of people. The camera aims toward the train on the platform, at the moment of departure, and remains recording for the entire length of time of that train’s journey. In the work *Praha 15.10 – Linz 20.22* (1992), we see a classic era Prague railway station platform eerily lit, being neither night or day, with the train and subsequent trains as ghostly apparitions and bands of light and dark, and a bench seat scrubbed out, almost decaying from human interaction. There are no humans present, except for the spaces they have displaced. The five-hour exposure shows clocks in perfect focus but the hands are not apparent. Departure details on information boards absent, as those details were displayed too quickly to even register. We see in Wesley’s work what can’t be seen, and yet what we think we should see is fleeting or invisible, as “time is visually reconfigured through images that compress it into a unique form of visibility.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> “These time objects known as works of art produce the time of history and the history of their time, so their representation of history must also be a critical history of representations.” Lageira, “*Tempus fugit*,” *Between Times – Instants, intervals, durations*, 25.

<sup>54</sup> Koepnick, *On slowness: toward an aesthetic of the contemporary*, 67.

<sup>55</sup> Lageira, “*Tempus fugit*,” *Between Times – Instants, intervals, durations*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> Mar, *Between Times – Instants, intervals, durations*, 14.

Open shutter photography, by virtue of its precise static position, is able to layer a multiplicity of movements and durations within the one image, thus enabling the subtraction of temporary information. The lasting and permanent features are etched deep into the image but the frenetic fast paced traffic is blurred into the timeline. In the Railway Station series, Wesley's documenting of the material and symbolic transactions between the cities of Munich, Prague, Budapest and Berlin after the fall of the Iron Curtain, gives us past, present and future stitched together. Thus "(t)he seeming absence of temporal specificity *is* these images' precise and historical index."<sup>57</sup> This analysis of the spacio-temporal relationships between cities via train networks, can be contrasted to the bewildering experience faced by the new train traveller of the early 1800s. In the words of German Poet Heinrich Heine of his trip between Paris and Orleans, he observed that "(s)pace is killed by the railway, and we are left with time alone...I feel as if the mountains and forests of all countries were advancing on Paris...the North Sea's breakers are rolling against my door."<sup>58</sup> Heine was confronted by the unusual sensation of space being shortened over time, while Wesley's works extend time over fixed space. Two journeys travelled at opposite ends of the industrial epoch, both being experiential confrontations that stretch human perceptions of time.

### **Aesthetic dispossession**

As the factory becomes more automated, and the requirement for traditional manual skills fall, societies around the world find themselves entering a new post-industrial era. Artificial Intelligence, robotics, and off shore production are erasing employment options for whole sections of the global population, leading to a shift in generational expectations of work engagement and usefulness. The disenfranchised worker "cannot stand the way modern society is going. In particular they loath it's aesthetic – *when it is not industrial*."<sup>59</sup> This situation has been brought about by what Bernard Stiegler calls 'aesthetic conditioning;' of being locked into an unbreakable cycle of industrial cultural immersion, circumventing normal aesthetic experience, making an alternative viewpoint impossible. Stiegler, in his diagnosis of this human condition, identifies alongside 'symbolic misery,' *libidinal and affective misery* as well, where 'individuals are stripped of their ability to form aesthetic attachments to singularities or singular objects.'<sup>60</sup> The workers of the old industrial economy have largely seen a collapse of their aesthetic ambition, as a great proportion of the population are "totally subjected to the aesthetic *conditioning* of marketing," and "estranged from any *experience* of investigation."<sup>61</sup> The industrial workplace while it has served as a default cultural bedrock on which to anchor ones identity and community, has also conscripted generations of families to lives of continuous and repetitive labour, a restrictive environment, where ideas and instinct are

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<sup>57</sup> Koepnick, *On slowness: toward an aesthetic of the contemporary*, 70

<sup>58</sup> Koepnick, *On slowness: toward an aesthetic of the contemporary*, 65

<sup>59</sup> Stiegler, Bernard. *Symbolic Misery, Volume 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014) 3.

<sup>60</sup> Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery, Volume 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch*, 5.

<sup>61</sup> Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery, Volume 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch*, 3.

modulated and repressed by lack of true diversity or variance. Collapse of this ‘traditional’ familiar support structure, has resulted in wide spread anxiety over what the future world offers compared to the relatively stable past. Finding work for people when their traditional jobs no longer exist, presents an extremely challenging problem. This sense of alienation felt by millions of people around the world has led to anger and civil unrest, particularly noticeable in recent times with the surge in support for contemporary alt-right leaders like Marine Le Pen, Donald Trump and Pauline Hanson, promising the protectionist sentiments of anti-immigration and anti-globalisation, all of which, sadly, minimise the potential for diversity, opportunity and inclusiveness.

## **Conclusion**

A new ‘creative economy’ is forming in the vacuum left by a retreating manufacturing sector. Globalism, despite its immediate pitfalls of labour displacement and a sky rocketing free market among other failings, has provided more advantages than restrictions, as more cultural diversity and interaction increases humanity’s potential. This “potential of culture as a driver of development has been proven...with evidence that there exists a sizable, strong and valuable productive sector comprised of creative and cultural resources and activities.”<sup>62</sup> The creative economy is “an invitation to rethink – creatively – what its flourishing might mean, tangibly, in the everyday lives of people in diverse circumstances “<sup>63</sup> With the visual arts, literature, performing arts and music being at the core of these cultural and creative industries, a new paradigm presents itself where the original idea once again becomes a more important commodity than sheer labour.

To facilitate an environment conducive to creativity, is to liberate society from the entrenchment of its body and mind from constant work engagement. To allow time and space for contemplation is to become more connected to the richness and potentiality of what it means to be a human. Slowing down time enables perceptual clarity. Seeking silence from society’s cacophony is to see and hear new possibilities. To push against the forces of modernity and reclaim our humanness, is to refuse. Calvino, a champion of the original idea sees “imagination as a repertory of what is potential, what is hyperthetical.”<sup>64</sup> For humanity can never be conceptually limited if we create a sufficiently fertile ground, free from time restraints and the contamination of noise.

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<sup>62</sup> *Creative Economy Report 2013 Special Edition*, (New York: United Nations Development Program) 10. Accessed June 1, 2017. [www.unesco.org/culture/pdf/creative-economy-report-2013.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/culture/pdf/creative-economy-report-2013.pdf)

<sup>63</sup> *Creative Economy Report 2013 Special Edition*, 15.

<sup>64</sup> Calvino, “*Visibility.*” *In Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, 91.

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