

DOG NOSE AND TREE MIND:  
THE FUTURE OF ART

by  
Paul Di Filippo

Confessions of an Art Junkie

I am an addict of vicarious experiences. Fully half my waking hours are devoted to either producing or consuming canned nuggets of simulated reality. Despite the intrinsic worth and fascination of my own personal life, lived minute-by-minute in realtime immediacy, I can't get enough of second-hand experiences, whether those of actual people or imaginary ones.

But there's no need for me to be ashamed of my addiction. I share this affliction with the whole human race. In fact, this inherent narcissistic/voyeuristic need to create and consume secondary experiences not actually lived out by the percipient is perhaps the defining mark of humanity or of any sentient race. We are ourselves only because we can become the stranger.

It's doubtful whether individuals of any other terrestrial species feel this compulsion to share the exterior and interior lives of separate members of their species. However intelligent or emotional apes, dogs, dolphins or cats are, it would surprise me to learn that they trade reports of their dreams or fancies. Humanity alone seems to rely on this empathetic ability, which, at one extreme, consists merely of trading brief newsworthy accounts of quotidian activities, and at the opposite end, almost inhabiting another's skin.

Vicarious experiences come in many wrappers. Various classes of non-fiction--from journalism, anecdotes and informal essays like this one to the most abstruse scientific or philosophical speculations --hold down one end of the spectrum of shared knowledge. The other end of the continuum of stimulation/simulation is occupied by works of the imagination where the primary impulse is the creation of alternate or interpreted realities. Fiction, poetry, theater, painting, sculpture, music, dance, movies, photography. Activities which reconfigure the materials and conditions of the universe in an esthetic way so as to convey from creator to percipient a gestalt impression of the creator's unique heart/ mind/soul.

In short, art.

Before There Was Even Any Hollywood

This fascination with vicarious experience might at first seem a deadly, decadent postmodern condition. We've all heard the doomsayers and puritans. Distanced from our "real" lives, they claim, we are held in thrall to "false" sensations, force-fed alluringly glamorous, factitious narratives of no ultimate ethical, utilitarian or moral import, eye candy and junk food for the mind. Nothing seems to me to be further from the truth.

The unqualified, uncensored pursuit of art and this activity's importance in mankind's daily life--in the preservation of sanity, the attainment of happiness (however temporary), the boosting of our powers of practical invention--have been an integral facet of our species' nature since the moment we became fully human.

Most likely, all art was once solely oral. The practical uses of language, no doubt, quickly led to more fanciful story-telling. But soon the plastic arts must have developed, from cave-painting to sculpting to exotic rituals of worship and burial. Commercially untainted, vitally felt, this generously defined practice of art extends back probably

millions of years. As Steely Dan once sang, in "The Caves of Altamira": "They heard the call and they wrote it on the wall, before there was even any Hollywood."

Today, of course, art is a big industry. "Entertainment" dominates the USA's domestic economy and our exports. Whether our current art scene is doing its job in replenishing and expanding our inner landscapes--or devastating them instead--is a matter I leave to the cultural pundits. Instead, assuming that art of some sort will continue to matter well into the future, I'd rather initiate a value-neutral discussion by focusing on what speculative technological developments might mean to the very shape and contents of the arts.

### New Packages, New Consumers

Right now, it seems to me, art is poised on the verge of exploding into a flock of new forms, thanks to a host of potential inventions, mostly in the bioengineering field. Additionally, wild-card developments further down the road offer more radical possibilities. These innovations will demand a dictionary of new critical and creative terms, as well as new grammars, syntaxes and tools of exegesis. Exotic fandoms and venues will proliferate as well, making the future a lively wonderland of art.

I'd like to divide my scattershot speculations into three areas: new media, new senses, new consciousnesses.

The first area is the most obvious. Just as old media die off (in the clever manner initially described by Bruce Sterling and Richard Kadrey), so are infant media continually born. Chances are good that few artists today are doing fresh work for stereopticons. On the other hand, the first artist of virtual reality has yet to appear (mostly because virtual reality itself has yet to be perfected). In the future, new media will pop up with some regularity--although what I chose to define as media below might surprise you.

The second and third realms are of less apparent relevance. But consider: all art is funneled through our senses, and apprehended by our consciousnesses. Should our senses become extended or our minds alter, novel artforms will certainly arise to satisfy our new abilities.

It is this area that offers the most startling possibilities. Media have always come and gone, but the human sensorium and brain have remained static for millennia. This explains why we can have a sense of continuity with those pelt-clad ancestors blowing powdered pigments through a reed around their wall-splayed hands. But future engineered mutations might very well render the art of the past inaccessible to our descendents, and vice versa. A sad prospect, but an inevitable one.

And of course these three areas interact and overlap. New media might demand new senses, which in turn might demand new cerebral processing routines. In fact, co-evolution will probably prove the rule in the future of the arts, just as it has in so much of human history.

### Please Say Hello to My Artwork

New vessels for eternal artistic impulses have been discussed to some degree in SF, and consequently I'll cite a few stories in this section. But the artistic implications of new senses and new mental faculties have been considered less often, if at all.

Virtual reality is the one new medium almost everyone knows. Perpetually hovering on the edge of reification, VR tantalizes with possibilities. As they currently exist, MUDs already represent a novel kind of consensual co-creation of imaginary

places. And surely the independent or cooperative construction of complete "mirror worlds" that eventually might tickle every single human sense offers fertile ground for artists. The Tolkien-inspired term of "subcreation" will assume new meaning, as hackers strive to render unique secondary universes in greater resolution and quirkiness. I tried glancingly to depict such a milieu in my story "Streetlife" (reprinted in *Ribofunk*), but the full artistic potential of VR has yet to be depicted--despite the work of Neal Stephenson in *Snow Crash* and Vernor Vinge in "True Names".

At the opposite technical remove from VR, yet strangely allied, are such constructed playgrounds as Disneyland. From individual fantasy rooms (think Ray Bradbury's "The Veldt") to largescale environments, the potential futures of such micro-managed parks has yet to be written, although John Varley has done astonishing work along these lines in books like *Steel Beach*. Hi-tech wonderlands a la Larry Niven's *Dream Park* might very well include temporary mental conditioning to plunge a customer into their historical re-enactments.

What of unmediated reality? Will the globe's weather ever fall under man's control? If so, then artists of rain and snow, sunshine and lightning, aurora and storm, might flourish. If nothing so dramatic ever becomes possible, then perhaps the smaller artform envisioned in J. G. Ballard's "The Cloud-sculptors of Coral D" might arise.

Robotics and artificial intelligence are fields where technicians will gradually give way to artists, as lab prototypes become commonplace consumer items. Already, an outfit such as Survival Research Laboratories, with its shows employing destructive mechanical beasts, points the way toward a unique cybernetic creativity. Contests such as the annual robot wars also qualify as creative exercises, if not yet art. The prospect of other kinds of *tableaux mecaniques*--robot plays, robot sculptures--also looms.

Artificial life and artificial intelligence, beside having practical applications, could lend themselves to artistic expression. Just as plant- and animal-breeders currently vie to create prize-winning specimens judged in prestigious contests, so too could A-life and AI blossom into juried competitions or solo displays. The most complex digital ecology, or the synthetic personality with the highest rating in the Turing Test Tournament would surely count as artistic creations.

And certainly the actual old domains of creativity just mentioned--plant- and animal-breeding--will not go unchanged by exploding technologies. When genetic engineering and cloning become hobbyists' pastimes, all the old constraints of raising prize-winning flowers and cattle and pets will be overturned. Chimeras and transgenic marvels will abound, a Dr. Seuss menagerie, expressions of their creators' esthetic programs. In this scenario, flesh and blood become merely another medium. And here we begin to tread on dangerous ground, as human genes become part of the common clay. As intelligence levels rise in fabricated beasts, issues of slavery arise. It is not impossible that at some future gallery opening, the distinction between an artist and her sentient artwork will be minimal, and conversations between patrons and loquacious creations will form part of the presentation.

All these media will flourish without the necessity of leaving the Earth. But any kind of proletarian space travel opens whole new media. Reduced or zero gravity will alter many old art forms, as testified to by Spider Robinson in his *Stardance* series. Terraforming will entail artistic choices, as Kim Stanley Robinson brilliantly illustrated in his Mars saga. But what of sculpting the asteroids, Saturn's rings, or solar flares? The Solar System a canvas?

Why not? Some artists have always thought big. But surely the race in Paul McAuley's *Confluence* series who rearranged all the stars in the galaxy into pleasing patterns visible from their constructed world must represent the ultimate in artistic ambition. Their only competition might be the godlike immortals in Phil Farmer's *World of Tiers* books, whose pocket universes represented expressions of their characters.

### Do You See What I See?

Let's turn back to near-term prospects.

Every one of our senses stands open to enhancement, with consequences for all art.

Arguably, sight is our most important sense. Yet our eyes deal with only a small portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. Extend their receptivity further, and you change the entire palette of the visual arts. But not only infrared and ultraviolet light become "colors". What of X-rays, radio waves, and cosmic rays? Could permanent varying displays of such high-energy outbursts be crafted for artistic enjoyment? Holograms are just one step below such creations.

But photons are not the only transmitters of energy. What of neutrinos? Could humans be rendered sensitive to these ghostly particles? What would a neutrino image "look" like? And would the first humans with such new senses go classically mad, in the manner of *X--The Man with the X-ray Eyes*?

Physicists theorize that the force of gravity is transmitted by a particle called the graviton. As it has evolved, the human body is of course already sensitive to gravity. An internal sense called proprioception plays a part in delivering feedback about our body's status within the play of gravity. Fish such as sharks possess "lateral lines", organs that deliver information about ambient watery motions. With enhanced proprioception or modified lateral lines, could we detect gravity more overtly, witnessing the spasms of whirling neutron stars? Would the design of rollercoaster rides become more of an acknowledged art form? Would the placement of certain masses in artistic conjunctions be read as art? And what of pulling similar tricks with magnetic sensing, an ability already possessed by birds and bacteria?

Our hearing could benefit from extension also, of course. Subsonic and ultrasonic symphonies await such improvements. But our sense of smell, with its hardwired connections to our emotions, seems to me even more ripe for development. Given the sensitivity of canine nostrils, we might compose "operas" of odors. Despite the facetious tactics of film director John Waters and his "Odorama" experiment, odor tracks might well accompany movies catering to an audience of hyperacute sniffers.

Chefs exhibit an artistry all their own, and gourmets respond accordingly. Amplification of our taste buds seems the most negligible contribution toward strange new artforms, although surely many people would adapt such enhancements for simple daily enjoyment. Finally, we arrive at touch: the Chinese once cultivated the handling of carved and polished jade objects as an esthetic pursuit. What of a sense of a touch that could distinguish individual molecules, or even atoms? Every surface would be a tapestry to sensation. Nanofabrication of invisible structures would make a kind of ultra-Braille experience possible with seemingly undistinguished objects that hid a secret architecture of touch. Also, the hyperarticulation of our finger joints might promote a kind of gestural art. Already, contemporary sign language has developed grammars and esthetic conventions all its own. The dance of our descendents' flexible fingers could

support a Polynesian richness of meaning. (Again, I dealt very tentatively with this in my *Ribofunk* story, "Distributed Mind".)

### The Redwood's Imagination

Isaac Asimov's "Dreaming Is a Private Thing" is one of the more famous stories dealing with the manipulation of dreams, a potential new art often imagined in SF. Should access to dreams--reading them out of the sleeping mind, tweaking them and writing them back--ever be perfected, the crafters and guiders of dreams--like Roger Zelazny's *The Dream Master*--will certainly rank as artists (although for every artist there will be a thousand hacks, providing cheap and shoddy dreams).

Telepathy--whether organically or technologically mediated--is another area well explored by SF. Narratives or visual images conveyed direct from mind to mind are analogous to the oldest arts of oral storytelling and painting, but delivered through a different medium.

More intriguingly, I envision several types of mind modification that appear to be undiscussed within our field.

Parallel processing is a computer buzzword, by why shouldn't such a functioning be attainable by humans? Like some kind of van Vogtian dual-brained superman, could we keep two or more independent channels of processing running simultaneously in our altered brains? And if so, then what of experiencing multiple threads of narrative that coalesce at their ends into one spectacular frisson? Rather like being able to listen to and enjoy multiple CDs playing at once, which all happen to end on the same titanic, Beatlesque chord.

Consider something I term an "overlay". An overlay would be a wetware-encoded temporary set of perceptions, reactions and pseudo-memories you could purchase and install to enhance a particular artistic experience. Reverse-engineered from selected individuals, overlays would alter your artistic experience in a predetermined way. "Wearing" the overlay of a member of a different race or ethnicity, you would experience certain artworks with an authentic "otherness". Imagine reading Alex Haley's *Roots*, say, while employing the overlay of an ex-slave. Or viewing Picasso's "Guernica" through the overlay of a war refugee. Such wetware would truly provide vivid moments in another man's shoes.

Of course, "transcripts" of "foreign" life experiences would become artforms in and of themselves. A full suite of false memories--an overlay-plus edited down from living subjects or created from scratch--would in many ways provide the purest vicarious experience possible. And although it would certainly be thrilling to don the mind of someone of the opposite sex or someone from an outre culture, humans would not be the sole providers of such transcripts. Finally, we could break out of our species-specific *weltanschauung* and know what it means to be another kind of mind--perhaps the ultimate subtextual goal of all artistic explorations. Inhabiting the intellects of our pets or of wild animals --of trees, even, granted that some kind of consciousness could be replicated from their fully unriddled workings--would be truly liberating

And experiencing "alien" minds would no doubt lead to the discovery of new emotions. Are you aware of the German word *sehnsucht*, or the Portuguese word *saudade*? Both terms refer to a kind of melancholy nostalgia or ache, half painful, half pleasurable. The fact that other languages identify emotions for which we have no single English word is an indicator of the range of feelings yet to be catalogued and evoked.

What does a redwood feel upon attaining its fifth century of existence? Someday we might be able to answer, if not in words, then by handing a friend a plug-in module off our library shelves.

This is a day I, as a hardcore and inveterate consumer of art, hope to live to see.