PARR Geoff
Standing in a Lake with a G5 and 8 gigs of Random Access Memory

Abstract
This paper discusses paradoxes arising in art practice, digital technology and the environment and is spiced with a Tasmanian slant and an activist flavour. Geoff has a long and distinguished career as an artist-academic and activist. He was appointed to the inaugural Chair in Art (1990) at the University of Tasmania where he served as Head of School in other senior positions before his retirement in1998. He was Chair of a study committee report, Tertiary Visual Arts Education In Australia, 1980, Visual Arts Board, Australia Council and is the first artist appointed to the Humanities Panel of the ARC, 1996. His has work in most of Australian's major public art collections. He was a member of the Lake Pedder Action Committee and a foundation member of the world's first green party, the United Tasmania Group. Along with many staff and students from the Tasmanian School of Art he was arrested and charged during a demonstration to save the Franklin in 1983. Geoff is the Inaugural Fellow of the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools.

Biography
A long-time resident of Tasmania, Geoff Parr was born in Earlwood, NSW, in 1933. A tertiary art teacher for 35 years, he is Professor Emeritus of Art, Honorary Research Associate and a registered supervisor for research higher degree candidates at the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania. Geoff was a member of the Humanities Panel of the ARC for 3 years. He is the Inaugural Fellow of the Australian University Art and Design Schools and currently Chair of the Board of Contemporary Art Services Tasmania.

Standing in a Lake with a G5 and 8 gigs of Random Access Memory
This address is a collage of ideas. The collaging process holds a fascination for me. It's the drama of juxtaposition. The collision of binary oppositions at the fault line, the unexpected questions that arise from the gulf between. There are three primary ingredients in the paradoxical title: the artist, the environment in which the artist is placed, and the computer. Thoughts were drawn from snippets of each, or that was the plan until one of the unexpected questions took over.

The Artist
As a kid I had lived for a time on the red soil plains of North Western NSW in a town with 7 pubs and artesian baths for whites only; its called Moree. The very best times were spent chewing up the miles, 30 per hour, with Uncle Lew in his Fordson Truck. As a wool buyer Lew Conway travelled far and wide to gather bails of greasy wool. There was a power and inexorability about the flat sparsely treed land we passed through. The power came from uncompromising sameness: the only change in the plain country came when a flock of galahs sitting on the branches of a dead tree decided to turn as one, north-east to south-west, soft mid-grey to vivid pink.

Environment
From the top of Mt Wellington facing southwest one sees range after range of rugged mountain peaks. You don't see the button grass plains and rain forests that fill out the spaces between the ranges. That aspect flattens the topography and saw-tooth silhouettes jam up against each out. Flying over the quarter reveals few signs of habitation. South- West Tasmania is called a wilderness. Large parts of the Central Plateau, the West Coast, the North-West corner and certain of the off-shore islands have the same status. Exercising due care and suitable preparation, most of the wilderness areas are accessible. Experiencing this natural environment changes you, it's a values change. "I thought life was like that, but no, it's like this." These pristine and fragile places out-strip much else which is worthwhile, to form a unique contribution to the world's diversity.

The Tasmanian environment is a diverse and accessible resource for artists and as well as a considerable challenge for subjective expression. Martin Walsh did an MFA. He was the first RHD candidate I supervised. Martin had a head full of ideas about landscape and navigating and markers in landscape and

stereoscopy. From Martin I learnt that wilderness can be the local tip site; the concept is more rugged than the pristine notions I had entertained. Martin used computing to colour-tag red/green, large format stereoscopic Mt Lyell mine images for a spectacularly disorienting examination exhibition.

In her PhD project Doctor Anne Morrison sought to express a corporeal response to natural environment in an exhibition of large paintings with surfaces built up in layers. Working over several canvases at one time on the studio floor with paints and solvents, was interspersed with visits to her wild haunts to renew sensations and contemplate the project from on-site.

Doctor Troy Ruffles explored non-intrusive processes suitable for recording the rhythms of nature to be observed in urban settings. Troy did a considerable amount of work adapting the painting technique of glazing to digital printing only to abandon the process in favour of video camera stills digitally enhanced and printed out on canvas.

For artists the possibilities, the reach and the capacity of new technology holds the enchantment of stepping into new worlds of process and presentation, with new audiences, new connections to international sole mates, new applications and possible markets. At the same time, artist's may choose the latest and most elaborate tools or they may choose to utilise the simplest of means.

Lucia Usmani is a current postgraduate student. A piece of her work was shown in a BFA Honours exhibition, and also at the CAST Gallery. It appeared as a highly reflective, regular three-dimensional pattern stretched over a floor-to-ceiling convex curve. As I approached the work I was impressed by visual excitement created by the piece, but I was also intrigued to discover what advanced technology Lucia had employed to produce such a complex and detailed artwork. Close inspection of its construction revealed a process using empty beer cans, tin snips, pins and precise manual organisation.

Computing And Digital Technology

Today, it requires considerable flexing of the mind to embrace a range of contemporary phenomena, be they thoughts or processes or technologies. At a quickening pace the human condition is being augmented by the application of advances in knowledge, most notably in microbiology and digital technology. Today or tomorrow, some individuals will step clear of those long periods of imperceptible adjustments made through natural selection, to pursue direct supplementation from biological and/or technological forms of body-mind hybridisation. Such transformations are bound to further separate the tendrils of human existence even as they extend the state of being. Bifurcation of the species is a likely, but unspoken early agenda.

Even now there is considerable tension between the naked self and the machine-systems-augmented self. Computer technology and genetic engineering are considered by sizeable sections of the community to be the culprits responsible for invasion of privacy, instabilities arising from rapid change, radical economic and social divisions and environmental degradation. Divisive measures caused by advanced technology are layered over long-standing separation between the materially advantaged and disadvantaged human beings. The two schisms do not exactly match as the former includes people ideologically opposed to the replacement of pure experience with virtual experience. Here is an extract from a manifesto published in the mid-nineties:

> *It is certain that technology is creating for human beings a new physical and social environment radically different from the spectrum of environments to which natural selection has adapted the human race physically and psychologically. If man does not adjust to this new environment by being artificially re-engineered, then he will be adapted to it through a long and painful process of natural selection. The former is far more likely than the latter.*

This is a small piece of the Unabomber's 35,000 word Manifesto published by the Washington Post in September 1995.

In *The Digital Dialectic*, Michael Heim describes a backlash to digital technology by people wishing to preserve real life experience:

> *In the eyes of naive realists, computer networks add unnecessary frills to the real world while draining blood from real life. Reality, they assert, is the physical phenomena we perceive with our body senses.....*
> *From the standpoint of this empirical sensuous world, the computer system is at best a tool, at worst a mirage of distracting abstractions from the real world.*

Michael Heim goes on to draw attention to a fear, especially by those who lived through the Nuclear Winter, that the same power elite who formerly moved atoms as they pursued a science without conscience, will now move bits that govern the computerised world.

It seems obvious that existing divisions and resulting unrest would become irrepressible if a separate hybrid species of human was to be realised. And yet it is probable that radical modifications to extend a human's life span and enhancement of intellectual capacity will soon be available, if it is not presently the case.

Already machines assist us in many facets of our existence and we can be biologically boosted by powerful drugs and supplemented with body parts. It can be argued that we are already cybernetic organisms. Is it possible that along with consciousness came realisation of "the death of the conscious-self" and that realisation planted a sub-conscious imperative to transcend the family of man and beast and seek to escape the biological limits of all living things for an after-life in this life?

I SET OUT TO EXPLORE OUR MARRAIGE TO TECHNOLOGY BUT BECAME SIDE-TRACKED BY THE PRIMARY ROLE OF HUMAN CREATIVITY

Starting with sticks and stones - clubs and missiles - the family of humans have sought to augment their modest physical capacity. The very survival of the species required the provision of additional means of attack or defence, control of fire, stone and bone tools and so on. Supplementing our naked selves has been our hallmark for tens of thousands of years and made us outstanding amongst the animals. As we continued to innovate and become more numerous, so the competition shifted from other species to other peoples.

Jared Diamond is considered to be a remarkable scholar for his brilliant contributions to ecology and evolutionary biology. He is the author of *The Rise and fall of the Third Chimpanzee* and *Guns, Germs and Steel, A short history of everybody for the Last 13,000 years*.
In seeking reasons for the momentous developments in the human species about 50,000 years ago, known as the Great Leap Forward, Diamond places considerable weight upon the development of language as it allows for exchange and the coordination of minds. This is from *Guns, Gems and Steel*:

> *As for a cause, I argue in my book The Third Chimpanzee for the perfection of the voice box and hence for the anatomical basis of modern language, on which the exercise of human creativity is so dependent. Others have suggested instead that a change in brain organisation around that time, without a change in brain size, made modern language possible.*

The issue for me was how humans survived and became the masters of their domain. Amongst the animals they alone were the rigorous inventors. I was coming to the view not just that it was the early humans ability to augment their capacities with technologies, but to innovate in many other aspects of their lives. The early human mind seemed to have been able to grasp the potential of basic technologies, to organise group action and to develop and perfect systems leading to things such as the husbanding of fire.

Also there would have been connections between standing upright, developing a primary dependence on the visual as the early warning sense, and an ability to think beyond the immediate. Necessity made them look ahead, and if you add group memory to the mix, planning becomes a possibility. A creative sensibility would have been employed not just in the evidence that has come down to us, such as pressure flaking or artefact making, but in the general way everyday matters were undertaken, evidence of which can only be attested by their own brilliant achievement in surviving and flourishing.

Jared Diamond again, in *Guns, Germs and Steel*:

...then some 40,000 years ago in south western Europe, where abundant artefacts are associated with fully modern skeletons of people termed Cro-Magnons.
Of the Cro-Magnons' products that have been preserved, the best known are their artworks: their magnificent cave paintings, statues, and musical instruments, which we still appreciate as art today.

This is where it hit home to me. Art practice is such an ancient activity. I began to think about the contribution of art making at that time of tenuous survival. I thought about the way artists think in things and think in images, both of which can deal with complex entities. I thought about communication before and during the development of a basic language: symbols and signs, and diagrams and body language. Ephemeral stuff, gone without trace. Art may have made a bigger contribution than had been previously acknowledged.

In my enthusiasm to elevate my discipline, I had fallen into two mammoth pits.
One: there would have been no separate art practice or anyone who was more of an artist, than a hunter, or a skin stitcher, or a fire-lighter.
Two: I was looking back 13,000 and more years - looking for the contribution that my concept of art may have made - rather than projecting forward to the present what was being put into place back then - the legacy our ancient ancestors left for us. At the top of the list that legacy would include, creative, non-verbal modes of thinking and associated heuristic practice.

In looking back over the chasm of time, we look to hard-copy evidence and then we say these particular bits are what we regard as art. The isolation of this approach diminishes the central role played by creative thinking in most facets of early human existence, just as it discounts a greater connection with our field. Belatedly, we label some things as "art" because they are a product of an early thinking processes, the same thinking used in practice by today's artists and designers.

This is a quote about artists thinking and art practice. It is from the *1980 report to the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council on Tertiary Visual Art Education in Australia.*

It is not widely understood by people who have little or no contact with the practice of art what is meant when artists claim that the kind of thinking they do in the course of making works of visual art "cannot be pinned down in words". It is a claim they invariably make with total certainty, if not with further exposure, since visual art activity transcends the usual structural processes of discursive thought and cannot be accounted for (even after the event) in verbal terms alone.

When artists are preoccupied by the creation of purely visual statements, establishing relationships and deploying symbols and syntax that have to do primarily with the process of visualisation and the liveliness of our tactile imagination, they deal with modes of awareness and exploratory thinking that are no longer highly developed in the majority of people in our society ..

The humans of 13,000 and more years ago were impelled to devise the means to augment their capabilities, not by jumping higher, or running faster, or kicking harder, but by skilfully employing things and systems and circumstances to their advantage, all the result of thinking creatively.

Life forms tend to have been shaped by external factors working upon inner necessities. Species other than our own react and are so conditioned. The modifications that evolve are usually attracted towards maintaining equilibrium within an ecosystem. Therefore big changes probably only eventuate when some event disrupts the ecosystem. On the other hand the minds of human beings evolved to be innovative rather than to be micro-reactive.

What of the legacy provided by ancestors such as the Cro - Magnon? We know of them from their bones, their garbage and their artefacts and yet their primary and essential contribution may well have been their inventive processes.

Jared Diamond and many wise people in the field place great store on the development of "modern language".

Accurate communication would have been a necessity for strategic group coordination and cohesiveness, at a time when language was only at a very rudimentary stage. The formation of cohesive groups would have had to be a precursor to language development. Group establishment came first because it was the group that required better communication and therefore language.

Before "modern" language it seems that complex communications issues would have included diagrams and signs scratched on bark or in the earth and body language and expressive gestures and sounds and mime. (I have dubbed this mixture the "Theatre of Correspondence".) It would be aeons before words would provide more than labels in this elaborate theatre. However a lack of verbal sophistication may initially not have been to the disadvantage of a group's creativity. Finding the means to communicate with little or no language skills to speak of requires ingenuity as travellers to distant lands can testify.

Heuristic patterns of thought drew in and integrated fragments of language to the group's theatre of correspondence. It was only when language developed a high degree of sophistication that it gradually rose to pre-eminence.

Now here is a surprise. Verbal skills may have indeed negated some aspects of creative thinking. Effective verbal communication required the speaker to transform their thoughts into a stylised system of expression. This fosters a linear pattern of thought, moving from premise to conclusion. Ratiocinative thought came to dominate serious correspondence and displace less efficient, more open, heuristic modes of finding out how to tell it, although these earlier modes would have still persisted in practical activity[1]. This is not an argument in favour of reinstating the theatre of correspondence, but an argument for the cultivation of heuristic patterns of thought in art practice, and for artists themselves to seriously contribute to a better understanding of what goes on in their heads during their own creative events.

Cultivating the senses, and particularly the visual, would also have been critical. Early humans would have been acute observers of what was happening in their vicinity, looking for patterns of behaviour in other animals, in the growth of plants and with the elements.

As I thought about what Jared Diamond termed the "exercise of human creativity" I envisaged many of the ingredient which motivate the best art schools' programs and indeed it may equally apply to other disciplines using heuristic systems of training. Unfortunately today's efficiency-driven education (to my mind a contradiction in terms) sticks with the shortest distance between any two points.

Epilogue

If you flew into Hobart Airport in the dark and the cloud was high enough, you could have picked up navigation beacons on the hills and the flashing light beam from the control tower and eventually the runway lights. In filthy weather and deprived of the full light show, modern navigational technology will guide the aircraft down to the white zebra lines at the start of the runway. This is just one of the benefits of advanced technology.

About this time of year or a bit earlier, the Short-tailed Shearwaters (also known as the Mutton Bird), with a wing span of about one meter and weighing approximately 500grams, come in from out at sea to one of the 285 colonies in South Eastern Australia. Leaving again in April, their migratory path takes them north along the western regions of the Pacific to the artic region and then returns through the centre of the Ocean. Each way the birds travel about 15,000 kilometres and they don't come ashore during their passage. Each year they make their way to the same burrow in the same colony. National Parks and Wildlife have counted as many as 26 return visits by one particular bird to its burrow.

[1] Practice uses an inner dialogue matching tangibles to concepts.

References:

Guns, Germs and Steel, A short history of everybody for the last 13,000 years
Jared Diamond, Published by Vintage 1998.

Tertiary Visual Arts Education in Australia, A report to the Visual Arts Board
Australia Council 1980.

The Digital Dialectic, New essays on new media, edited by Peter Lunenfeld,
Published by MIT Press, 2000
Includes Michael Heim's essay entitled *The Cyberspace Dialectic*

Vision and Art, The Biology of Seeing, Margaret Livingstone, Harry N. Adrams, 2002

The address included slide images of artworks by Martin Walsh, Anne Morrison,
Troy Ruffles and Lucia Usmani and images from *Place*, a 1983 artwork by Geoff Parr