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Complexity, Democracy and Cultural Policy

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Complexity, Democracy and Cultural Policy

Paul Kirkman
2008-09 Clore Fellow

1. Art is more than the sum of its parts

"It is the early seventies. All the participants of what will be called Punk are alive, but few of them know each other. They will come together during 1976 and 1977 in a network of relationships as complicated as the rabbit warren of Dickens's novels. The other beginnings of Punk – the musical texts, vanguard manifestos, pulp fictions – already exist, but first we need the location, the vacant space where, like the buddleia on the still plentiful bombsites, these flowers can bloom.[1]"

In this essay, I aim to sketch a rough model of the relationship of art to the society that creates it and use that model to think about how we can best support the arts. The model is based on two ideas. One is that art contains knowledge about the world we live in, but knowledge of a radically different kind from that contained in science or other more rational discourses. The second idea is about the notion of emergence: the essay treats taste as an emergent property of a complex society. Looking at art in this way changes the way we think about ideas of innovation and democracy in the way we support the arts.

The birth of punk may same a strange place to start that journey, but it demonstrates three important cultural phenomena. First, that art can be more than the sum of its parts. You could not *deduce* punk from looking at the people and artefacts Jon Savage alludes to in the quote that starts this section. Secondly, art can move from marginal to mainstream without anything very obvious changing around it. What changed in Britain in 1976 and 1977 that caused punk to explode? And, thirdly, these changes can happen incredibly quickly: in the summer of 1976 virtually no-one had heard of the Sex Pistols; by the summer of 1977, they were a threat to national security.

Punk has a musical history, with a lineage rooted in 1960s American garage bands. The originally pejorative term "punk" has been used since the late sixties to describe music in this striped down, raw rock and roll tradition. Moving through the Velvet Underground, who helped promote other late 1960s punk antecedents the MC5 and Iggy Pop's Stooges, and Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers, a scene developed in downtown New York City featuring, amongst others, the strange, proletarian androgyny of the New York Dolls – for a time managed by Malcolm McLaren - and "punk" began to be used for a more or less identifiable musical scene centred around CBGBs on the Bowery, with the Ramones and Television at its centre.

A parallel history of Punk is that of the "vacant space" mentioned in Jon Savage's opening quote: a space created by Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood in their shop at the Worlds End on the Kings Road in London. Known variously as Let It Rock, Too Fast to Live Too Young to Die, SEX, Seditionaries and finally Worlds End, it went through an surprising set of incarnations. It started by selling Teddy Boy outfits and vintage rock paraphernalia to an incongruous clientele:a mixture of the tail end of the original Teddy Boy scene – probably the most traditional and class loyal of London's working class youth sub-cultures – and art school and fashion world hipsters. From here it moved further into the fashion margins as SEX. While still keeping the drapes and brothel creepers, SEX began to sell overtly confrontational clothing: rubber and leather fetish wear, Nazi paraphernalia, and T-shirts provocative enough to result in arrest on public order grounds[2].

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1 Savage 1991 p3

2 "I left the shop wearing the infamous cowboy T-shirt and went to meet a friend in Piccadilly. I was arrested

for vagrancy on the grounds that I offended public decency. They put me in a Black Maria, took me to the police station and charged me. It was horrible and humiliating." Alan Jones, assistant in Sex 1975-77, quoted in Colegrave and Sullivan 2001

Vivienne Westwood, Jordan, Chrissie Hynde & Alan Jones in SEX 1976

Accounts of this time, stress the understandably narrow appeal and self-conscious exclusivity of the shop and its denizens.

> Sex was brilliant. I absolutely loved it. When it first opened, there were only a few of us who went there: the Bromley lot, Anne Ferris, the first girl in London to have green hair, Little Debbie, Sue Catwoman, Linda Ashby, not a lot more. It was like a little club. At first no-one wore the stuff it sold. It took a lot of guts to wear it all those years ago.[3]

A third story would be that of Malcolm McLaren and his self-invention as a pop svengali in the grand, old Denmark Street Tin Pan Alley tradition. He wanted to create pop superstars. His first attempt was with the New York Dolls. They wanted to be "like the Beatles" but thought that McLaren was too much of a "schmuck"[4] to manage it. Ultimately, their story ended in a drug and alcohol fuelled implosion. McLaren's second attempt was the Sex Pistols who "were going to be the next Bay City Rollers". Ultimately they too burnt out, but not before they had become something much bigger and stranger than the Bay City Rollers.

A fourth story is the legacy of the Situationists passed down from May 1968 in the Boulevard St Michel through King Mob and the London Art Schools to a bohemian, marginal elite.

A fifth, the despondency of London life in the late 1970s: "Living in London in 1976 was like living in Poland. You couldn't buy mineral water and spaghetti came in a can."[5]

So what's the point of these stories? That none of them really explain what happened. It is a recurrent theme in accounts of the history of Punk that the Americans had already invented the music before Malcolm McLaren or the Sex Pistols or the Clash had even picked up a guitar. That's true, but doesn't explain the moral panic provoked by the Sex Pistols and the Bromley Contingent. It is another common-place that SEX was the domain of just a few arty outsiders and young, streetwise misfits. What do a few fans of brothel creepers and bondage gear have to say to the world? And Malcolm McLaren's svengali dreams seem remarkably conventional: how could he have ever compared the Sex Pistols to the Bay City Rollers.

The point is that there is no way to simply add together these strange influences to predict the result: no-one would ever have thought 50s fashion + garage bands + bondage gear + situationalism + svengali = Punk Rock. But what you do see in the McLaren-Westwood crucible at the end of the Kings Road is an act of catalysis, in which remarkable new results emerge from the interaction of unlikely and unpromising ingredients.

I want to think about emergence of this kind – rooted in particular social and material conditions, yet unpredictable and often sudden – as a model of how societies produce art and culture in general. My hypothesis is that the birth of Punk is just a stark and dramatic example of something that is going on all the time: art and culture emerging from the rub of everyday social and material interactions.

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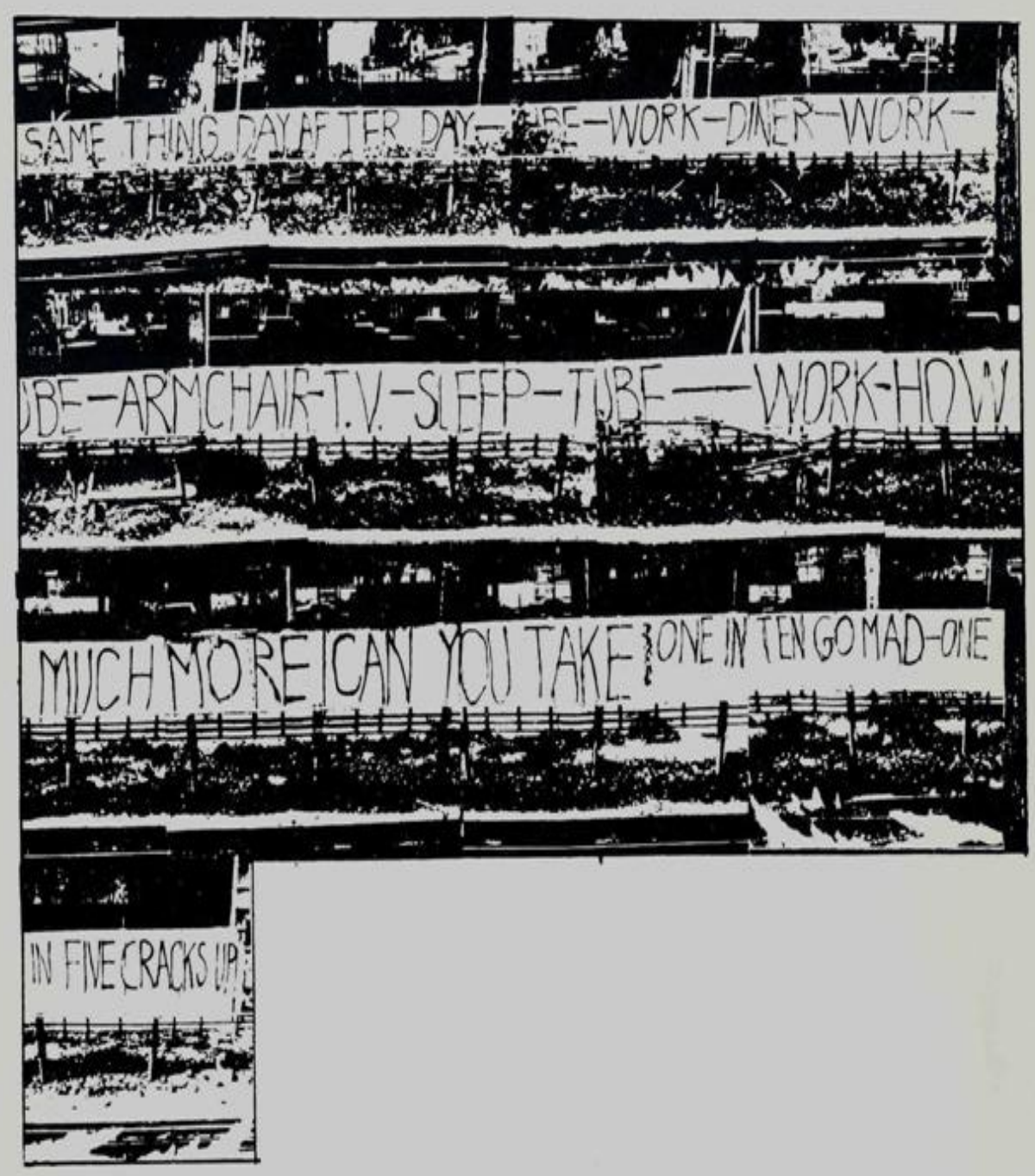
3 Philip Salon quoted in Colegrave & Sullivan 2001
4 Syl Sylvain quoted in Please Kill Me: the Uncensored Oral History of Punk Legs McNeil & Gillian McCain
5 Robert Elms quoted in Colegrave & Sullivan


SAME THING DAY AFTER DAY— BE-WORK-DINER-WORK-
BE-ARMCHAIR-T.V.-SLEEP-TUBE—WORK-HOW
MUCH MORE CAN YOU TAKE? ONE IN TEN GO MAD-ONE
IN FIVE CRACKS UP!

King Mob Grafitti, London Underground 1976

2. Art *shows* us things that cannot be *said* in matter of fact description

In the summer of 2008, Sir Brian McMaster, former Director of the Edinburgh International Festival was commissioned by James Purnell, then newly appointed Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to carry out a review of how best to promote excellence in the arts and culture. Sir Brian set out a simple definition of excellence in the arts. Excellent art is not about technical or practical prowess; it is art that affects people and "goes to the root of living"[6].

That simple theme – the root of living – needs some unpacking. I want to look at what it means for art to be 'about living'. There are lots of things that are about living. Events in real life – the birth of a child, the death of a loved one – say more to us about our lives than art. And there are all kinds of human discourse that are about living. Sociology, to take an -ology at random, is about living, and can reveal some of the same kinds of truths about us and our society as art, but it isn't art. What is different about art?

The place to start is with the idea of that art is not just in the world, it is also about the world.

How art is different from life? Art obviously is part of our lives in one sense. It exists; we go to see it; we buy and sell it; we enjoy it[7]. On the other hand, a usual feature of art is that it is somehow *about* the word and our lives in it. It isn't always representative of the world in a straightforward sense. It doesn't have to involve any kind of figurative or diagrammatic representation - what does a Rothko represent? - but we expect it to reflect on our lives somehow. This draws out a significant point about art. It has a dual existence. It has a utilitarian function as part of day to day life – entertainment more or less – but it also has a representative or reflective function. It isn't just part of life. It tells us something about life.

How then is art different from sociology and all the other -ologies? Their job is the much more literal and exact representation of the world and our lives in it. The distinction in the early Wittgenstein between *saying* and *showing* is a good way of thinking this through.[8] In the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Wittgenstein set out to show the limits of our conceptual understanding of the world. The world in his view is made up not of objects, but of states of affairs, and the sum total of all that can be meaningfully said about the world is the description of these more or less complex, factual states of affairs. The rest he describes as 'nonsense'. But 'nonsense' for him is a kind of technical term. There are things that cannot be 'said', things that in this strict sense are 'nonsense'. They cannot be packed squarely within the bounds of our conceptual descriptions of matters of fact, but they can still be 'shown'. He acknowledges the possibility of a kind of communication which is not bound up with a conceptualisation of how the world is divided up into facts.

The difference, then, is this: the -ologies are concerned with the describing the world as a series of objective matters of fact: with *saying*. Art *shows* us things about the world: things

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6 McMaster 2008

7 It has been pointed out that there are elements of Heidegger here on the distinction between thing and work of art "Works of art are shipped like coal from the Ruhr and logs from the Black Forest. During the First World War, Höderlin's hymns were packed in the soldier's knapsack together with cleaning gear." Heidegger 1978 p150

8 I am simplifying the philosophical arguments quite a bit and also misrepresenting Wittgenstein's saying and showing distinction a little in this account, but I think it helps make the point better in this manner.

WHAT IS PAINTING

DO YOU SENSE HOW ALL THE PARTS OF A GOOD PICTURE ARE INVOLVED WITH EACH OTHER. NOT JUST PLACED SIDE BY SIDE? ART IS A CREATION FOR THE EYE AND CAN ONLY BE HINTED AT WITH WORDS.

John Baldessari, What is Painting, 1966-68

that would be missed in the straight edges of objective, matter of fact description.[9]

This puts us in a position to understand more clearly how art and science differ. The physical and social sciences are interested in producing representations of the world that are like a *diagram* of reality, sketching out its features with clear, hard-edged precision.

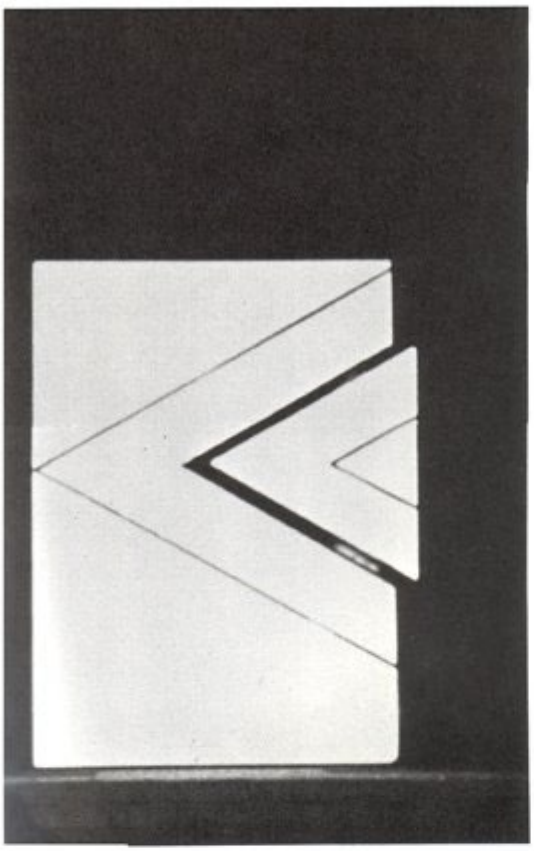
The relationship of art and the world is not like that at all. Art often does produce representations of the world – that kind of representation is the single most popular artistic strategy - but its success as art is not related to the felicity of those representations. It is quite possible to produce a faithful likeness in words or pictures that lacks any artistic merit whatsoever, or conversely a great work of art that is either non-representational, or gives a strongly transformed representation of the world.

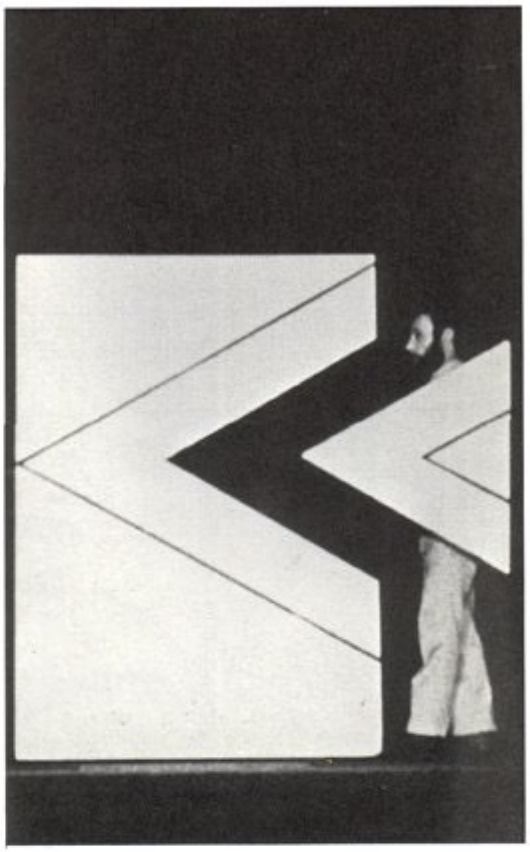
What is required is that it shows something about our lives or the world to the audience of the art. It is not accurately representing the world that counts, but rather producing something that someone wants to listen to. The way in which a work of art is about the world will always be mediated by the reception of an audience, and only the truths that an audience, however small, is willing and able to apprehend, have meaning. Art does not seek to map the world and judge its success by the accuracy of the map. Art is successful if it has an audience that is willing and able to see what it shows about the world.

Art's primary relationship, then, is with its audience, rather than the world beyond that audience, and its relationship with its audience is much more intimate, than the distanced and measured products of science are with the world it seeks to represent. Art needs to fit with its audiences sensibilities like two sides of a torn piece of paper.

So what then is this sense of fit that art has with our world and lives and how does it arise?

9 Again, this all quite complicated. A work of art often will contain all kinds quite flat, matter of fact descriptions of the world. A work of prose would be the most obvious example. But my contention would be that if it did nothing else than flatly describe, it wouldn't be art. The art is in the bit that makes it more than a piece of technical writing. And that is the bit that shows us something we can't describe in conceptual terms. X was once asked to say what his music meant and replied “If I could do that I wouldn't need to make the music.”





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ik droom dat iemand de deur intrapt
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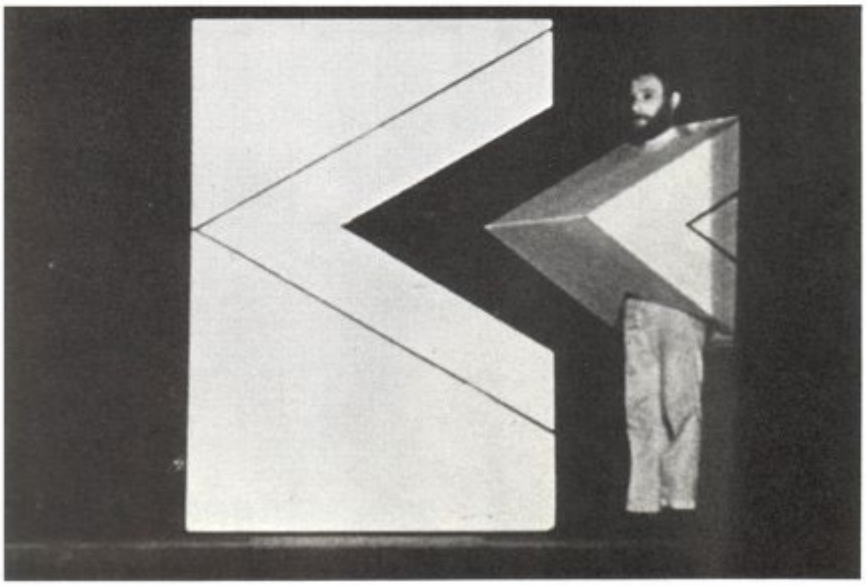
ik droom dat ik niet ben



Studio Scarabee

4. Taste is an emergent property

"I remember that St Martin's gig...The Sex Pistols were brilliant. I couldn't say musically they were brilliant, but it was just a shock to see. They were nothing like you'd ever seen before. They captured all the things you really wanted to do and say...and they did it with style."[10]

Emergence can be defined as "the arising of novel and coherent structures, patterns and properties during the process of self-organisation in complex systems"[11].

Emergent behaviours or properties result from the interaction of elements in a system. But rather than the interactions of these elements resulting in a simple additive or linear result, they can sometimes, when feedback and other complex interactions take place, produce results with a qualitatively different degree of organisation or complexity, often quite unpredictable from the characteristics of the elements of which they are made.

For example, five wind machines lined up and blowing in the same direction with a good amount of space would produce one big wind blowing in the direction of the wind machines. Five wind machines set up at angles, blowing down a narrow tunnel with uneven surfaces, would produce unpredictable eddies, back-currants and turbulence, as the winds bounced off the walls and into one another. Often though, the wind would settle into a more or less stable, if complicated and not predictable, pattern of wind currents. That pattern of wind flows would be an emergent property of the simple inputs produced by the wind machines. It has a number of interesting properties.

First, and perhaps strangest, it exists at all: there *is* a pattern of wind currents and we can observe it.

It has evolved dynamically out of the more simple inputs.

It is novel: the complicated shape of the wind currents didn't exist in the five individual streams of air.

It is coherent: the currents stay more or less the same, or they are at least observably the same developing pattern, as long as the wind machines keep blowing.

Furthermore, when systems like this are complex – in the sense that the interactions of the simple parts and the whole system feedback on one another in non-linear ways – the emergent patterns can see sudden changes.

Systems like this produce a kind of internal amplification, where microscopic changes in the behaviour of the elements that make up the system can be blown up into effects that change the macroscopic behaviour of the whole system. With stable inputs, the system will operate in a stable state, but as the inputs of the system change, after a period of gradual development they will suddenly jump or flip to a new stable state. If we turn up one of the wind machines gradually, or swing one of them round slowly, for a while there will be only

10 Marco Pirroni quoted in Punk. A Life Apart Stephen Colegrave and Chris Sullivan Cassel & Co London 2001

11 Reference needed

a gradual change in the pattern of wind currents in the tunnel. But past a certain point, the currents will suddenly jump and transform themselves, settling then for a while into a new

Aeroplane engine turbulence

stable pattern of flows and eddies: what scientists call a new phase state[12]. The features around which these patterns in the behaviour of the system coalesce are known as strange attractors.

It is easy to see how we might map the birth of Punk onto this model of emergence. The social milieu of late-1970s London provides the environment in which the elements can interact. The strange mix of influences come together: Teddy Boys and bondage; American garage-band rock; second-hand Guy Debord and a pop and media marketing machine swung out of kilter. And while there is no way anyone could have seen upfront how they would combine together, looking back we can trace all those influences in the end result. We see the interactions, unpredictably catalysed, flipped into a new phase state.

And I think it is not hard to see how we could frame a general understanding of the emergence of cultural practices in this way: as clearly rooted in the society that created them; but unpredictable and liable to change unpredictably as that society changes.

I want to use this idea of emergence as a general model of how a society produces its culture; to think about art as an unpredictable effect of simpler material and social interactions and see if that is helpful for framing our understanding of how art works and how we can best support it.

One way to frame this model would be in a strictly deterministic way. We could see specific cultural forms and individual works of art as the direct result of these unmappable social interactions. This idea has some attractions. There is a strong appeal to the idea of thinking about folk traditions, for example, as having grown out of the society to which they belong in a straightforward way. They seem to belong wholly to that society, yet to be something existing in their own right: more than the bare, material facts of the society and vulnerable to sometimes even quite small changes in the social order that has created them. In a similar, but accelerated way, contemporary phenomena of fashion and trends come quickly out of the ether: palpably linked to the here and now; always surprising; gone once the sub-cultural wind changes direction.

The thing, though, that these popular or folkloric forms have in common is that they are unauthored. It makes sense to think about them as emerging unmediated from their societal substrate, precisely because there is no identifiable artist, no single creative intelligence, mediating their creation. Nobody creates trends or folklore because we all create them collectively.

Art isn't like that. While it makes sense to think about folk traditions growing organically, I want to make room in an account of art for the creative act. Even though it is over 40 years since “The Death of the Author”, it seems central to our notion of art that a work of art is an actively created thing: the result of individual, or group, creative effort.[13] Perhaps more importantly when we are interested in cultural policy, supporting artists in making art is in

12 Or sometimes moving into an unstable, turbulent state without any regular repeating patterns, but for now let's concentrate on the possibility of emergent patterns.

13 Actually, I do not think my weak assertion of artistic authorship is incompatible with either of the notions that I would take to be central to Barthes thesis: that the author is a socially and historically constructed subject, not a radically free entity; nor that the meaning of a work of art is not the same as its author's intentions. Neither of these deny the actual existence of an author, nor the creative effort the author puts into a work of art, nor the centrality of that creative process to creating the work of art.

practice the way we support art being made. So we need an account that involves the artist as active creator.

At this point I need to go back to the idea of art as showing us something about the world; as something that fits with the an audience's experience of the world.

It makes most most sense not to think about individual works of art emerging from a societal context, but rather about societies willingness to accept and celebrate those works of art as emergent. What emerges from the hub-bub of society rubbing along, is not individual works of art directly: they are the creative acts of artists[14]. Rather, what grows out of a particular society is a sense of what art will fit that society. What emerges is, for want of a better word: taste.

You can see this perfectly in the quote from Marco Pirroni at the start of this section. The overwhelming sense is of a pre-formed taste waiting for the Sex Pistols to satisfy it: “they captured all the things you really wanted to do and say...they did it with style...I think it was co-incidental that the Pistols were actually good”.

This, then, is the model I want to experiment with: that there is such a thing as taste[15]; that taste is a collective sensibility that emerges, in a dynamic and unpredictable way, from the interactions of simpler material and social elements; that art that fits with taste shows us something about our lives, in the social and material world, that goes beyond what rational conceptual discourse can say; but taste, and thus the art that is successful in showing us something about our lives, can change suddenly and radically and sometimes from quite small and unpredictable causes.

14 Although, if you were attempting a much longer account, you might want to conceptualise the artists consciousness as an emergent property of the material world, or the artists personality and interests as an emergent property of social, genetic and other influences.

15 I do not want to suggest by this that taste is a simple monolithic thing. There are, plainly, multiple, various and overlapping tastes making up the whole. I say a little about minority tastes later in the essay, but a full treatment of the relation of the varieties of taste, mainstream, dominant, subversive, marginal and all the rest is beyond the scope of this paper.

5. Artists produce a surplus of innovation

This suggests that art proceeds by trial and error. Artists produce work and that is tested against public reaction. Initially, the public involved may be very small, confined to perhaps just a tight peer group around the artist. But even here, some work will take hold and some will slip away. It is possible to map sociologically the way that innovations take hold and spread from initial innovators, through early adopters and ultimately on to laggards and general acceptance.16 I am less interested, though, in a sociological account than in the underlying logic of this process.

What we are looking at is something akin to an evolutionary process. Art forays out into the world, in this model, in much the same way as newly evolved organisms. Only instead of the world of hostile or benign ecosystems and ecologies, art is braving audiences' and critics' rapture, outrage or indifference. Art mutates and some of those mutations flourish and spread; some take root only in a few sheltered spots; most don't survive at all.

If we believe there is any force in this evolutionary metaphor, it might be instructive to have a detour into how the logic of evolution might work for the kind of model we have been sketching so far. Obviously the processes of innovation and selection bear no resemblance to one another: there are no genes and predators driving the process. But the logic of the biological evolutionary process provides, I think, a model that can help think about artistic change.

Stephen Jay Gould in *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* sketches out an account of evolution during the Cambrian period that subtly but profoundly shifts the conventional conception of evolution in a way that is, I think, instructive for thinking about art: how it experiments; how it fails and succeeds; and how it develops as a result.

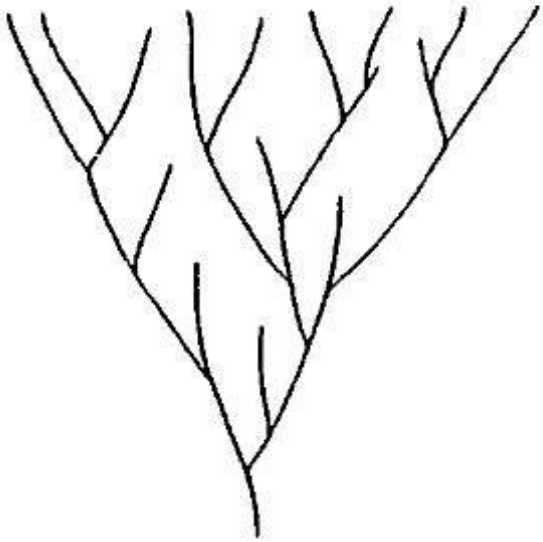
With biological evolution, there is a tendency to think in terms of the visual metaphor of the tree of life. We begin with the roots: a small number of simple antecedents. Over time, the tree branches out, and the simple beginnings morph into a gradually increasing number of more complex organisms, as mutations allow new organisms to become ever more adapted to specific ecological niches, in which they can thrive. Eventually, we end up with the most complex organism, homo sapiens, which has not just adapted itself to ecologies across most of the planet, but even adapted those ecologies to meet its own evolutionary needs17.

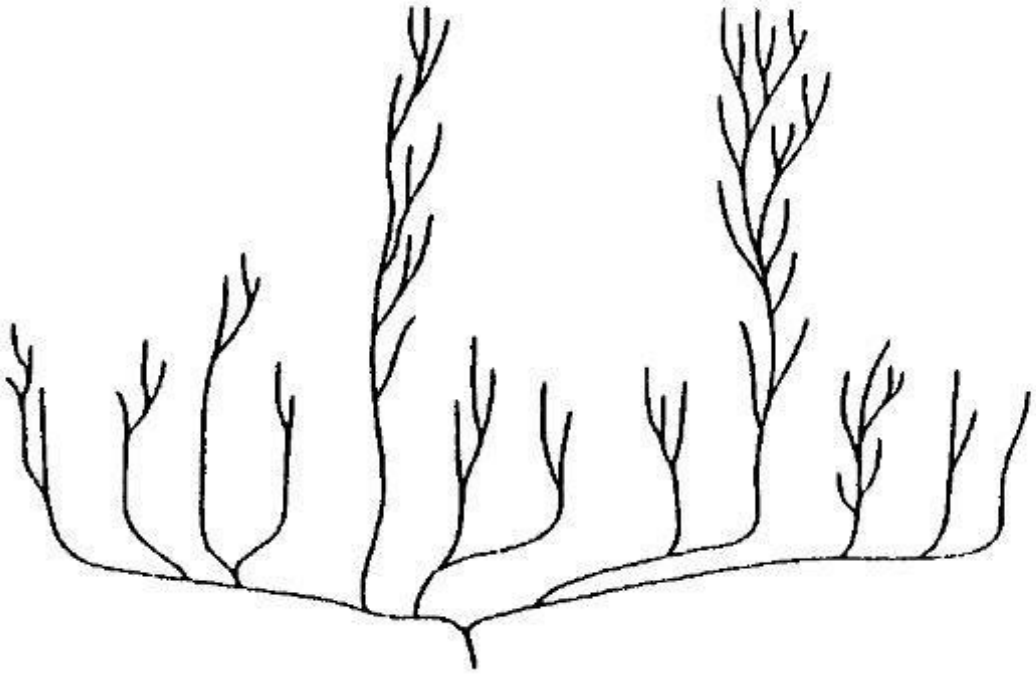
Gould argues, through a close examination of the fossil record, that this traditional and deeply ingrained image of the descent of man is wrong. Rather than evolution producing a gradual branching and smooth development towards greater complexity, evolution is more stop and go. The fossil record of the Burgess Shale covers a period in the evolution of life on earth when global climatic conditions created the circumstances for a huge number of new species to evolve. But rather than showing the gradual increase in number and complexity the traditional evolutionary model would expect, the fossil record shows two things. First there is an extraordinary increase in numbers of species, and in the variety of

16 Rogers E M; Diffusion of innovations; London; Collier Macmillan; 1983

17 Ironically, of course, man has potentially unsuccessfully adapted his environments it seems to be turning out, if the impact of man-made climate change continues.

forms they display, the so-called *Cambrian explosion*. But this is followed by a huge cull of much of this variety. Rather than a smooth development from more primitive to more





Models of natural selection showing larger and smaller degrees of mutation and selction

advanced, we see a lurch forward, a fantastic explosion of biological creativity cut off by the ecological guillotine. Rather than a model of increasing numbers of species over time, it seems that most of the diversity that life on earth had then seen became extinct in one short period.18

Gould argues further that it is far from pre-determined which of the many species survived and which became extinct. The conditions which determine their chances of survival are complex and not capable of prediction. Slight changes in conditions could result in large changes to the ecologies that pass the judgement of life and death on emerging species. Only slight changes would have meant different species would have emerged as the survivors from the Cambrian explosion. The history of life on earth would then have been quite different: whole phyla of animals that became extinct would have continued to evolve.

I want to extract three thoughts from this story.

First, the analogy of episodic creative explosions. Art does not move forward smoothly with a uniform pace of change. There do seem to be times, like the Cambrian explosion of prehistoric invertebrates, when artistic creativity flourishes. There are times when new kinds of art, not just individual new works, come into being. We can see this at different levels of historical detail. Across the centuries, at the level of Gombrich Story of Art chapter headings there are real differences of style and artistic concerns between the painting of the Renaissance and the Baroque. Closer-up, in the history of popular music, we could point to Rock and Roll in the mid-1950s, the British Invasion of the early-1960s, the late sixties Hippie Psychedelic revolution, Punk and so on as moments of crisis and sudden, significant change. If our model is correct, we would expect this to be linked to changes in the underlying societal conditions that produced the new audience for new work. We might though find that these changes were subtle and unexpected.

Second, the sense of trial and error in artistic production. Artists wilfully create art[19]. They do it by and large to please themselves: to produce what they think is good art. But inevitably, most art is not successful, even in the short term, but certainly not in the long term. That is not to say that it was badly made, or lacked creativity or had no relevance to our lives. It is simply that, for all kinds of reasons, it didn't survive: something might have

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18 We have to note that Gould's account is controversial in evolutionary biology, with other scientists drawing more conventional conclusions from the evidence of the Burgess Shale fossil record. I think though as a model, it can still serve us well.

19 It is possible to slip into two extremes here, neither of which I think is true. I do not want to imply that artists are radically free and their innovations almost random acts of pure creativity. It seems a simple matter of fact that we train and employ artists who have some sort of track record of producing art that works, in the sense of satisfying the standards of taste of particular art forms at particular times. It also seems a part of the concept of art, as it functions in our society, that it is the wilful, creative work of an individual or individuals, working in this way. That notion of art probably is a contingent one, with an ongoing history, but no less relevant to us us now for being historical and contingent. On the other hand, neither do I want to imply that artists are so conditioned by social and economic conditions or aesthetic traditions that creativity is a illusion. It seem an incontrovertible sociological fact that some people are better at creating works that show us something about life in the way I have been describing, and that they do this in an active, wilful (if not always rational and deliberative) way. Perhaps most interesting is around times of major upheaval, though, when both socio-economic and aesthetic conditions will become more complicated: people from outside the established cadre of professional artists are more likely to become significant; and artistic intentions more likely to be subverted, so that a work ends up playing out in a way that its creators might not have intended. For example, Malcolm McLaren ran a clothes shop and wanted to create the next Bay City Rollers, but ended up producing Punk.

taken up the same or overlapping cultural space more elegantly; its themes might have faded in urgency; its style might have gone out of fashion. Like the the Cambrian fauna, most of the art that has ever been produced does not survive.

Third, it is not possible to predict in advance what art will survive. If art succeeding is a matter of it fitting with emergent public taste, then no work of art can satisfy all of public taste, any more than any organism can fill every ecological niche. An infinitely complex variety of jostling and overlapping artistic practices will find places where they satisfy a need. But in that complex iterative process, which work survives and which fades away is a contingent question. It will depend not just on the innate qualities of the work, but how it fits with other work, and how the worlds willingness to listen changes over time. The art that works now may endure for a thousand years, or it may fade suddenly when the world changes. Art that seems marginal or even irrelevant now may find the world crying out for it in fifty years time.

6. The arms-length principle

“At last the public exchequer has recognised the support and encouragement of the civilising arts of life as part of their duty. But we do not intend to socialise this side of social endeavour. Whatever views you may be held by the lately warring parties, whom you have been hearing every evening at this hour, about socialising industry, everyone, I fancy, recognises that the work of the artist in all its aspects is, of its nature, individual and free, undisciplined, unregimented, uncontrolled. The artist walks where the breath of the spirit blows him. He cannot be told his direction; he does not know it himself. But he leads the rest of us into fresh pastures and teaches us to love and enjoy what we often beg by rejecting, enlarging our sensibility and purifying our instincts...”[20]

I have tried so far to frame my thoughts about making and enjoying art in a systematic way.[21] I hope that this can throw some of our current practices in supporting the arts into a different relief. I have three main questions I want to ask.

The first relates to the notion of taste and a canon of art. A public funder of the arts produces a sort of implicit canon, or officially sanctioned taste, by the act of supporting the things that it does. How does that relate to the emergent public taste I have been treating as a real feature of our societies? What are a public funder's responsibilities if it is to act democratically and responsibly?

The second is about the idea of innovation and heritage. Most people who support the arts would say they wanted to encourage artistic innovation. But the model I have sketched would suggest that real innovations will often be sudden and dramatic and caused by unexpected things. It also suggests all culture is only contingently significant. It may last for a thousand years, but its relevance could evaporate with only a slight shift in the cultural wind. And yet we feel a responsibility to the grand tradition. What useful role can someone who supports the art play if that is how things work?

The third is broadly about the notion of education. If audiences are crucial to the success of art, how might a supporter of the arts work with them rather than with those producing art to encourage the most satisfying artistic experiences?

What is the democratic responsibility of public funders of the arts? Any publicly supported art system produces a kind of accidental canon: of the things that get funded versus the things that don't. There is an implicit official taste even though public funders – in this country at least – keep a respectful distance from aesthetic judgements. There are good reasons for public officials to pass on to others closer to artistic practice decisions about

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20 John Maynard Keynes “The Arts Council: its Policy & Hopes” The Listener 12 July 1945

21 And also in a way that starts from looking at the production of art as part of a system. I worry sometimes about the dominant micro-economic frame of reference for thinking about the provision of public services, at least in so far as it relates to the arts. My fear is that the model used there, of the individual transaction and its arithmetic aggregation, tends to prioritise the individual hedonic aspects of art – how many people enjoyed it and how much did they enjoy it – rather than the aspects that I find more interesting – art as a carrier of embodied knowledge about the way we live. I accept that it is almost certainly possible to produce a straightforward economic account of art and its value, even 'intrinsic value' for example, making arguments for the value of the arts versus rival calls on public expenditure. See for example *Measuring Intrinsic Value* or *In Art We Trust* . However, I do think that this way of framing the arts is best complemented by looking sometimes down the other end of the telescope.

what art should pass the test. But if judgements are going to be made, doesn't a public funder have a democratic duty to make sure that the implicit official taste – the choices given life in the revealed preferences of the arts funding machinery - matches as closely as

Alexander Rodchenko in his studio wearing “production clothing”

possible real public taste? Isn't their job to give the public what they want, or at least, in a more subtle variation, what they would want if they knew it existed?

How would they do that? The obvious approach seems simple: try to assess the shape of public taste and measure the art it funds against that taste. If two simple questions can be answered, then we will all be a lot more secure that we are doing the right thing. What does the public want? And are we providing it?

The most prominent example of a project that we might have expected to produce this kind of map was Arts Council England's *Arts Debate*. It involved a series of rich and interesting debates among the public and between the public and artists. These debates produced a wealth of material about the way people approached the arts and the role they played in their everyday lives. There were also rich conversations between artists, the public and funders of art about how and why art is produced and what it means to different parties. But it did not produce anything so straightforward as a prescription for what art Arts Council England should support[22].

It seems to me that this is an inevitable consequence of the way art works. If public taste is a complex, emergent thing then a process like this will find it difficult to map for two reasons.

The first problem is straightforward complexity. The structure of taste produced will be full of so many overlapping, contradictory and subtle contours that any map will inevitably be a great simplification of the underlying reality.

The second problem is more subtle and connected to the way emergent properties of complex systems operate. If I am right, then the various voices that the arts debate sought to represent come together as a result of many feedback loops and subtle interactions in a non-linear way to produce an emergent taste. It is a qualitatively different process from the simple addition and will not be amenable to simple, linear statistical modelling. The only way to build up a picture of the whole from its constituent parts would be to run that process of feedback and interaction for real. The project of producing some sort of overall map of public taste looks impossible both in principle and in practice.

If producing a usable map of the whole of public taste is not a viable option, what about zooming in to particular parts of it? Might debates covering much smaller domains: debates about a particular place, or art-form, or demographic be more productive?

I think it is certainly worth a try, but would raise one doubt. I may be pushing an analogy too far, but my suspicion is that these questions about the shape of public taste might be like a fractal: each level of magnification would reveal a landscape of just the same degree of complexity as the level above. As coastlines resolve first into wide bays and headlands, then smaller coves and inlets, and so on down to the texture of individual grains of sand. So might questions about taste reveal ever more complexities as the zoom moves in. Perhaps there is a level at which these questions do resolve into stable and answerable questions; or perhaps there is a level at which the need for modelling disappears as it is possible to grasp the shape of problem as a whole. Only asking will show if this is the case or not.

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22 And to be fair, I doubt it was ever intended to do so. I am not trying to suggest the Arts Debate was not a success, but rather to question the possibility of any kind of grand mapping project in principle.

The Mississippi Delta from space

But, in any case, not being able to provide a detailed working map of the shape of public taste is not the same thing as saying that it is a hopeless job trying to meet it, or that any approach would be as good as any other. There are lessons in the structure of the problem that point to its solution.

We are trying to produce art that will fit into the contours of an almost infinitely complex public taste, produced organically from the interactions of the simpler elements of society.

The answer is not to try to produce a simplified diagram, procure works of art that approximate to the shape of the diagram and then present them to the jury of public taste. Inevitably, something produced in this way will be only an approximation of what taste is asking for, and will never have the same kind of fit as would art that really finds an organic niche.[23] Rather than trying to produce a rational estimate of what might work, the answer is rather to argue for a diversity of many kinds and scales of artistic production. If the problem is complexity, the answer required also needs to be complex. A monolithic response is least likely to produce the right answer. A response made up of many and various parts is most likely to work. [do a drawing to show this]

That suggests two possible, and probably complementary, approaches.

The first is obvious. Funding lots of one-off and small scale projects, without any single programmatic rationale, will produce a kind of diversity of artistic approaches. The odds are then that more will nestle more snugly against the complex surface presented by public taste than would a smaller number of bigger projects.

The second is perhaps less intuitive. It concerns the risk attached to too much clarity and consistency of approach. If we are worried about artistic diversity, then funding a small number of large, artistic institutions with a strong authorial or curatorial voice is also going to be a problem. That is not to say that big is bad: there will be lots of reasons why well resourced institutions will be a desirable part of the infrastructure of the arts. Neither is a strong artistic voice a problem: the problem is if it is the only voice that is heard. If the model we have been using is correct, we need to make the programmes of those big artistic programmes complex. The right approach is to encourage an increasingly porous approach to programming from institutions: the more directors, curators and artists contributing to a programme the better[24].

In a sense, this is just the re-inscribing and extending of the arms length principle. That famous maxim has always been presented as a way to prevent inappropriate political interference in the arts or as a way to avoid cramping the creativity of the individual artist. It seems to me that there is another reason to support it: the logic of the processes of artistic creation make simple top down prediction of what might be wanted doomed to failure, or at best to producing a kind of pale facsimile. Making art that works requires a series of distributed decisions, not top down direction.

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23 It seems to me that something like this happens in what we might call inauthentic art. When artists try deliberately to make work that they have rationalised as likely to meet public taste (or the taste of a potential funder engaged in a similar exercise themselves). It produces work that feels a little clunky, a little too squared off and straight edged in its contours.

24 This is doubly important because there is a certain reflexivity at work here. Large institutions control more of the output of the cultural sector have more influence than others. They are therefore more likely to be one of the contributing factors to the formation of taste than are smaller more marginal ones, at least during periods of relative cultural stability.

杨子荣与追剿队、民兵里应外合，攻打威虎山威虎厅，消灭了座山雕。（第十场"会师百鸡宴"）

Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy, one Chinese Cultural Revolution's eight model plays

7. Innovation comes from unexpected places

In the model I have been working with, the success of a work of art turns on a kind of relevance. Work succeeds when it satisfies public taste. As taste changes, so the pattern of the art needed to satisfy public taste will change. But that is not quite the same thing as saying it needs new art. Taste could be satisfied by appropriating or recuperating ideas and themes from the past or from other places, as well as by new art. Newness though has a strong pull.

It is a commonplace of cultural policy, in the UK at least, that it is the job of those who support the arts to encourage innovation. Either newness in art is thought to be good in itself or, in a more complicated variant on this idea, relevance in art is good and to keep art relevant in a rapidly changing world, it needs to keep refreshing itself, and so innovation should be encouraged for that reason.

But it seems to me that difference, or variety, are likely to be more important than straightforward newness. This is not just because the new is not guaranteed to succeed, there are also a question about what impact funders can have on innovation in the arts. Successful big innovations are likely to be about significant secular changes in society – changes that will not be driven by artistic innovation supported by arts funders.

A common feature of complex emergent systems is that they tend to display relatively stable periods, followed by what the scientists call bifurcations. As they reach a critical point, relatively small disturbances result not in a further small movement away from their equilibrium, but in a radical change that will shift them into a new stable state. These stable states are known as “attractors” or “phase states” and the classic example is the physical state of matter. If you heat a block of ice, you get warmer ice, up to the critical point at which the ice melts. You then get a radically different kind of entity: liquid water not solid ice. Heat the water and you get gradually hotter water, until at the critical point liquid water becomes gaseous steam.

It is possible to see these kinds of sudden radical changes in culture as well. Throw a few more elements into the mix, and turn up the cultural heat a bit on the 1970s Kings Road and strange things happen. A point comes where you get not just the same micro-cult with slightly sleazier T-shirts and louder, faster rock and roll. Instead, there is a shift from a tiny insular scene into a national, and ultimately world-wide, phenomenon. The same kind of bifurcation takes place as water turning to steam[25].

My contention would be that significant cultural change – real innovation, we might want to call it - is the result of these kinds of cultural bifurcations. These bifurcations in turn will be the result of smaller and unpredictable events in the social, economic or technological underpinning of the cultural world. If that is right, there needs to be a certain humility from those seeking to support innovation in the arts, about quite how consequential their actions can be in driving really significant cultural change. The critical factors are likely to be unknown to anyone, perhaps even the artists who make the innovation. Innovation will hit you from places you never expected.

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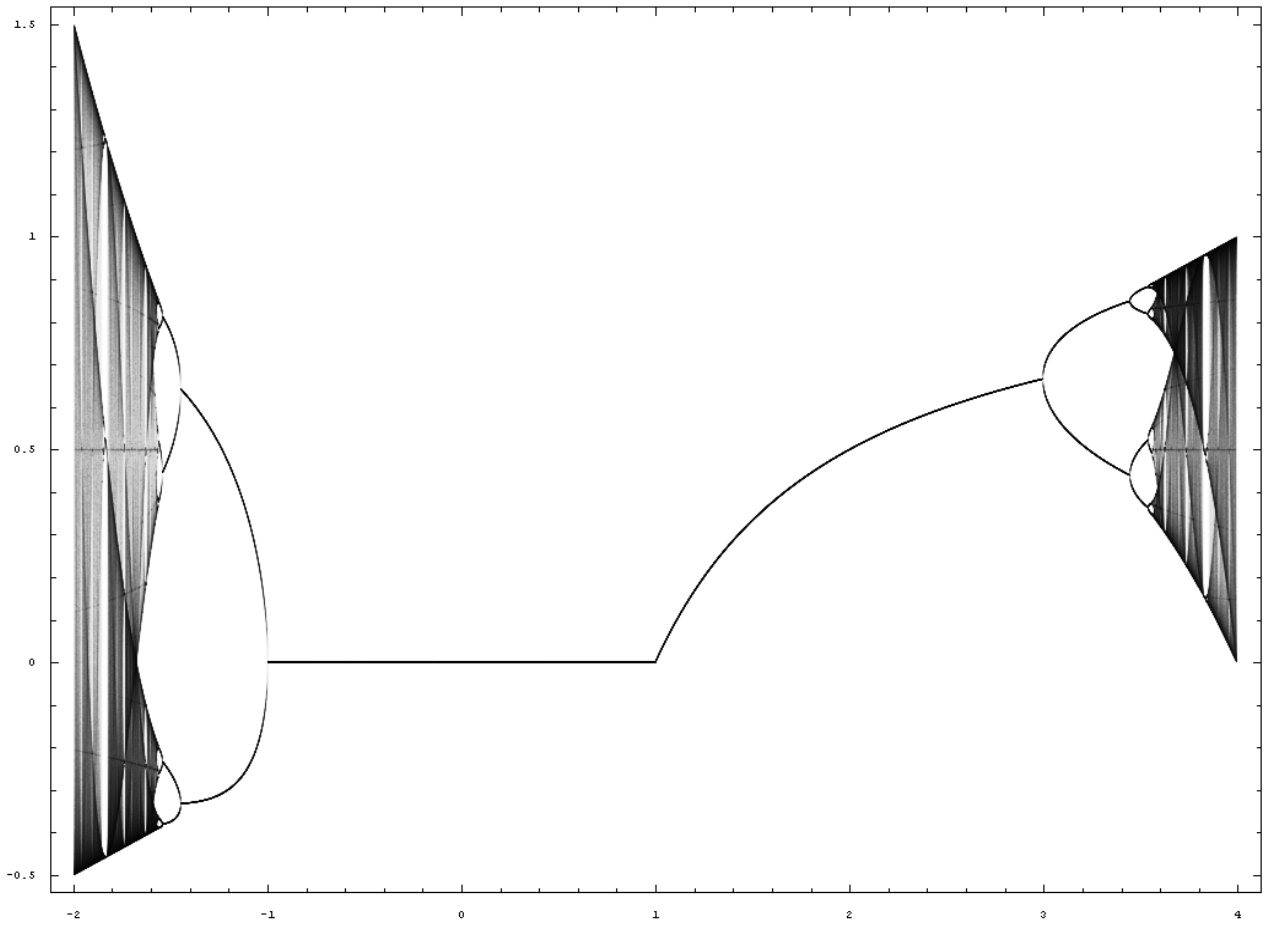
25 Or you could conceptualise it the other way round: as a change in the dominant popular culture, rather than a change in punk. In 1976, you have a pop culture dominated by the Bay City Rollers and Prog Rock. Twelve months later, British pop culture has changed radically, having been transformed by a new paradigm in the form of punk, bringing to the mainstream punchier songs, shorter hair and tighter trousers. The ice melts.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Bifurcation of phase states

I am not suggesting that an interest in innovation is pointless, certainly not in periods of relative cultural stability.

One issue is the reflexiveness of cultural practice. It is a common complaint – overplayed, but common none the less - that art can sometimes seem to be more concerned with its own conventions than it is with anything in the real world. I think the grain of truth in this works as follows. All art has a grammar, or a set of rules, that need to be learned before it can be appreciated. So part of the content of almost any work of art is the way that it plays with those rules, and with the relationship of those rules to the world beyond. Take this review by Roger Corman of Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather*

> It's a monumental combination of ... the American genre film and the European art film. Presenting a deeply flawed protagonist as an emblem of the contradictions within the American dream, the film touches on the immigrant experience that is part of the heritage of all Americans....The film embraces the quintessentially American crime genre, but subverts it by presenting violence as rooted in social necessity... Coppola brings artistry to his American world through several channels...performances that ... realistically ... span decades ...Framing, the composition of individual shots, mise en scene and, most notably, powerful juxtaposition confirm the place of artistry in American gangster cinema ... Beautiful, realist, revolutionary, 'The Godfather' stepped outside the boundaries of the traditional in both form and story. In doing so, it eclipsed and conquered the mainstream."

It is this last sentence that interests me, if we are thinking about innovation. Art works because it responds to a taste emerging from its own context, but not all that context is wholly external to the work. The internal grammar of the art form and the way those systems of rules and conventions relates to the world beyond forms a big chunk of the artistic context. It shows the way in which an artist can, through the manipulation of the tradition of the art form create the conditions of their own success, simultaneously creating work and shifting the context in which that same piece of work will be received: "eclipsing and conquering the mainstream" in Coppola's case.[26]

But it is unusual for this kind of innovation to be quite so broad ranging. As often as not, stylistic innovation and relatively subtle shifts of artistic concern are likely only to be of interest to a relatively small group of cognoscenti. Only where the innovations chime with significant secular changes in audiences do they become 'real innovations' – and arts funder led innovation in the arts are unlikely to drive those. The places were funders are more likely to have impact are likely to be more driven by the form of art and as such likely to be more minority tastes.

But paradoxically, it is precisely in producing a multiplicity of minority forms that these kinds of smaller innovations can be most productive. They are interesting as a contribution to the diversity of artistic approaches on offer.

If we want a range of artistic practices that is as adaptive as possible to changing social conditions demanding different artistic solutions, we want two things. We want a rich

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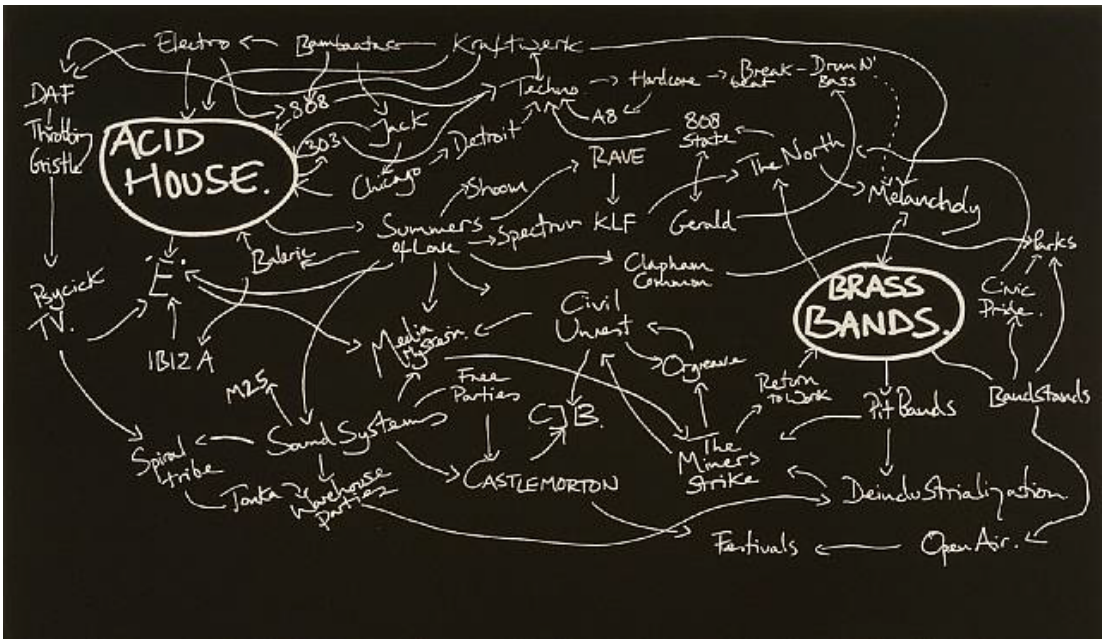
26 It's a clever trick and not only artists do it of course. Politicians are the another obvious example of people who create the conditions of their own success. And brands stimulate desires that never even existed ex ante.

stock of existing artistic approaches that can be used, and we want a system as loaded with creative potential as we can manage. Sometimes the world will find what it needs within what it has already differently configured. Sometimes it will want and need something



Jeremy Dellar, Acid Brass, 2005

radically new. Significant change comes from unexpected quarters, so one way to encourage innovation is by producing a greater diversity of points of creative potentiality that, given the right circumstances, may grow into something wonderful.

But, crucially,this kind of support for adaptability need not come only from innovative practice as traditionally understood. It is as likely to come from other unexpected places. Within the generality of public taste, there will be islands of stable, self-supporting artistic practices and audiences, richly appreciative but possibly little connected to the mainstream. They could be of many kinds: old-fashioned high-art cognoscenti; the bohemian marginal avant-garde; demographic sub-cultures based on race or class. Any could help produce the artistic response the public needs[27]. We cannot know where the next big thing is coming from.

The real value of diversity is the flexibility and adaptability it brings and innovation is an adjunct to that, not an end in itself.

27 There are other reasons, of course, to support minority interests. Work that satisfies the interest of a minority taste does at least satisfy that minority, and by satisfying a big and broad enough range of minorities, you satisfy the majority. But, in reality, it is a very moot point whether an approach where we would view public taste as a patchwork of minority tastes to be separately satisfied does in practice provide anything like a fair distribution across the spread of tastes. Evidence suggests a correlation between contact with the arts and markers of social and economic advantage, most notably educational level. It would also be possible to argue that there is an additional value in producing work that is shared by a broader spread of people, rather than more atomistic groups.

8. Innovative audiences

We have looked at one way to promote the capacity of the arts to meet people's needs: by promoting a variety of kinds of work; by increasing the energy within the system and funding work or people who look likely to be catalysts of change. These operate on artists and the art being produced. Another approach is to operate on the other side of the equation: on public taste. There are two broad approaches that might be taken to this task.

On one side, we can take the canon of art as fixed, at least for the time being, and see our job as moulding public taste to match that existing artistic canon. This approach, although not so baldly put, is a common one in arts education for young people, in the outreach programmes of artistic institutions and also underlies the philosophy of much public funding of the arts. School students need to be trained to understand an existing body of work in much the same way as they would be trained to understand the language and codes of mathematics. In the less formal settings of outreach programmes, young people and adults are given an opportunity to become acquainted with work from which they have been excluded for social and economic reasons, with the presumption that contact will change the tastes of some of them in favour of the neglected art form. And a common rationale for funding less popular art forms is an economic argument, based on the prospect of these kinds of outreach programmes. There is an information problem in the market. Lots of people just don't know anything about much of the minority taste publicly funded art. If they could be shown what it was like, some of them at least would be enjoy it. So funding minority art is acceptable, as long as you widen access to it.

There is plainly much merit in this kind of educational work. Artistic practices do have a kind of grammar which needs to be learned. For many people, much of the time, this will be a unconscious process, like the learning of a native language. No-one teaches us the codes and conventions of popular music, although many books have now been written on the subject and, famously, those codes and conventions do not easily cross generations. But many of us have needed to be taught to understand the classical musical tradition, or put some effort into teaching ourselves. And if we are thinking in economic terms, utility would be increased by introducing new, receptive people to less popular art-forms. This is valuable work and long may it continue.

But there is another direction to come at this problem from. Much as I have argued that the goal of an arts funding system ought to be adaptability, rather than producing a particular kind of artistic product (“innovative” or “high quality”), so we might want to look at the adaptability of public taste rather than its particular shape or character. If public taste is more susceptible to change and adaptation, it seems likely that it will be more open to a broader range of artistic practices, a range that will help people understand and appreciate better the world in the world in which they find themselves. Rather than seeking to engineer public taste into a suitable shape, our aim ought to be to increase public taste's self-organising capacity in response to the world. I do not pretend to know what that would mean as a detailed practical programme, but there are perhaps some pointers in existing developments in arts policy.

One possibility is in developments in arts education. British policy makers sometimes draw a distinction between educating people 'in the arts' – by which they mean programmes like that just described: educating people to understand and appreciate art forms as currently constituted - and 'through the arts' - programmes that use the arts and artists to pursue wider educational goals.

Creative Partnerships is the most significant of this second kind of programme and frames its objectives, not in terms of the arts, but in terms of the creativity of the young people it works with and the benefits to their wider educational, social and economic capabilities. This has been controversial in the British cultural community. It is an expensive programme, funded at a higher level than even the largest of Arts Council England's regularly funded clients and some are sceptical about the usefulness for culture of this choice in cultural funding. But, paradoxically, despite its lack of explicit focus on artistic outcomes, it may be a better choice for contributing to artistic ends than more of the earlier kind of cultural education and outreach. It needs to be tested, but it seems likely that a more creative public will be more flexible and adaptable in artistic areas as well as economic ones and open to a wider and more fulfilling engagement with a far broader spread of the arts.

Another possibility is in encouraging participation in the arts. This again suffers from a certain scepticism from many in the cultural community. Although few dare say it so baldly for fear of sounding snobbish, it is easy to detect an understandable concern that funding less artistically accomplished amateur work deprives higher quality art of scarce resources. When work to encourage participation in the arts is supported, it is almost always as an end in itself, with the value equated with the pleasure of the participants and their audiences. But it seems to me at least worth exploring the network effect of a culture more actively engaged in participating in the arts. Could it be that actually painting, singing, dancing and acting makes participants individually, and through them wider society, more open to a wider range of artistic forms?[28]

It would be a significant change of direction for arts funders to think seriously about targeting the artiness (for want of a better word) of the population at large rather than the nature of art being produced. But if the real driver of artistic success is the capacity and willingness of society collectively to engage with artists practice, logic suggests it deserves more attention.

28 There is another argument in favour of participation that suggest having lots of amateur artists is more likely to produce more or better professional artists. Although this sounds intuitively likely, evidence from the sports world suggest that wider participation does not significantly raise sorting standards, and the best way to encourage more and better elite sports-people is intensive training of tightly targeted prospects, chosen on the basis of indicators of likely talent.

9. Conclusion

Clearly, this attempt to use a model of taste as an emergent property of a complex social system is highly speculative. It would be an interesting research project to try to produce some kind of quantified model of parameters of taste and see how they behave as some of them change. It is possible that this might show that they followed some of the patterns found in the transformation of chaotic systems, although my intuition would be that the complexity found would be of an order considerably higher than that found in the relatively small number of complex transformations modelled to date.

My personal hunch, for what it is worth, is that with complex enough maths, it would be possible to model the way in which taste emerges from its complex societal underpinning: that the emergence model is not just metaphorical. But, even if it is just a metaphor, I find it an instinctively convincing one and I think there is use in seeing what we can derive from it.

It seems to me to explain quite a few intuitions that I at least have had about how art works. Art is intimately bound up with the milieu that formed it. However universal its themes, there is always something specifically of here and now in good art. At the same time, it emerges from its surroundings in a way that could not be predicted: it always somehow transcends the elements that make it up. Its development is not smooth; it is punctuated by episodes of great change and creativity, and periods of relative stability. Finally, art tells us things about our lives and the world we live in. But, because it shows us things about the world, rather than saying them, in Wittgenstein's terminology, it does not operate like a rational explanation of the world. A rational explanation is simply true or not: the sense of fit that a successful work of art has with the world is much more complex and organic. It fits with the infinitely complex shape of a society's emergent taste.

Taking this model seriously, then, helps to clarify some of my gut instincts about dilemmas in supporting the arts.

It shows why artistic integrity is vital for successful art and why you can't fake good art or produce it simply to order. This isn't a matter of some kind of mystic power of the artist. It is simply a matter of complexity and the limits of measurement and reproducibility. When artists try to produce art to a set of rational instructions[29] – even their own – designed to meet a particular artistic need it rarely works. The problem is simply that an attempt to measure the infinitely complex, organic contours of public taste, and produce art to meet them, is unlikely to result in anything more than a rough and clunky approximation. The job is just too complex for anything except an organic intuitive process.

It shows why newness is not an end in itself. What matters with art is what it shows about our lives; and its ability to mesh with our sensibilities. It might be old or new art that does this: it is an entirely contingent fact about the art and the world it finds itself in. There will be times when we will want to preserve art that still has much to say about the world. And while it is true that, if the world is changing, we will want to provide the art world with as much potential to adapt to that change as it can, that might mean preserving the old as one

29 Again this is complicated. There are examples in recent decades of artists working with prescribed patterns which are a limit on their artistic expression. Minimalist music, for example, or the literary experiments of Georges Perec. But usually, these involve not an attempt to map and model critical reception, but rather a sort of version of a bottom up emergent model of creation, in which simple rules produce unexpected and beautiful results.

of those sources on which the new can draw.
As you might expect, it says something complicated about elitism. There is no obvious way to construct a hierarchy of art-forms: whether or not works of art are successful or not will depend on their own abilities to chime with public taste. And that will change with time. There may be a canon now – it would be the sum total of the art that works – but it will change as times change. At the same time, art does not come out of nowhere: it takes its inspiration from the world, but it takes its inspiration from art as well. All kinds of minority tastes will hold the potentialities for art to refresh and renew itself and adapt, as it will need to do. So supporting these minority tastes is a good thing – both because lots of minorities can add up to a majority – and because transforming influences come from the most unexpected places.

It teaches humility. Big developments in the arts will have next to nothing to do with those who seek to support the arts. The things that really matter are small and unexpected and marginal. Much artistic development is beyond what anyone, even the artists responsible could expect or predict. That will require two things of arts funders: flexibility – a degree of randomness is more likely to hit the mark than a micro-detailed plan; and openness – the next big thing won't have any relationship with you – you need to let it in.

Finally, it makes us think about where the focus of attention is in support for the arts. Arts funders have traditionally been strongly artist-centred, and much of the this essay shows why that is a sensible approach in terms of defining what art should be produced. But this model opens a new way of thinking about working with audiences: less about model their tastes directly and more about increasing the self-organising capacities of society when it comes to responding to the world in artistic terms.