Out Of Everything I Miss Myself The Most

Lewis Henderson

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Be transformed by the renewing of your mind[1] *– Nina Simone*

1 Nina Simone 'Nina Simone: A Historical Perspective', documentary film produced by Peter Rodis, 1970, 20:18, 'I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free' *RCA*, first released in 1967

Framework

When I was younger I was completely infatuated with someone. She was brilliant. We used to hangout all the time. It's completely embarrassing to think about it now, but I was full of the most unbridled joy. I was ecstatic. I think initially I was a little scared to let her know exactly how I felt as I didn't want to seem too intense. We had studied together in London but had become close after graduating. She worked at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, looking after the space every Monday, on the off-day while the gallery was closed. We used to send each other SMS messages while she was at work. We'd message things like:

Hey! Wuu2 today?

Nothing much just hanging out with Henry.

She'd always talk about a Henry, *who's Henry?* I'd try and put it out of my mind, but she'd always bring him up, messaging things like:

Spent all day dragging Henry around. Lol.

Or:

Works been non-stop. Just me and Henry here today. We've got the place to ourselves… wonder what we'll get up to! ;)

Who was this mysterious *Henry*? She'd talk as if I knew him. I didn't know a Henry. I have a cousin called Henry, but she'd never met him. I imagined a handsome man who was everything I wasn't. I imagined Thierry Henry. I imagined Henry Ford. But no, it obviously wasn't any of them. I felt like she and *Henry* had a connection that we'd never have. I felt devastated.

But I'd been wrong, completely delusionally wrong. I found out *Henry* wasn't a human at all, *Henry* was a hoover, a "620-watt anthropomorphic vacuum cleaner"[2] to be exact. In the UK *Henry* is everywhere. He, the hoover that is, is a little red drum shaped vacuum cleaner with a face painted onto its side. I'd completely missed the joke. I had a moment of shattering epiphany while viewing her Instagram story - *where she dragged a red hoover, with a familiar smiling face painted onto its plastic body around an empty Whitechapel Gallery*. At that moment I couldn't help but laugh, I'd been so foolish. I'd been viewing the whole situation wrong. She was just being funny!

The feeling reminded me of a time earlier when I'd been looking out of a car window at a forest. The trees looked like a chaotic mass of trunks completely obscuring my field of vision, a natural wild forest governed by nature, but then the road shifted changing my perspective, all the trees lined up into neat rows, uniform in size and planted deliberately. It wasn't natural at all, it was a forest cultivated for the production of timber, and that too felt shattering. In a way it's a lot like humor. The word *shatter* is actually thought to partly stem from the Middle Dutch the word *schateren* meaning "to burst out laughing"[3]. There is a real absurdity between the way you see the world and the reality you're experiencing – and that's funny.

The realization *Henry* was a hoover and not a human forced me to change how I thought because the story I'd told myself stopped making sense. Inside our heads our cognitive self tells us stories to make sense of the world around us and our actions within it. It's fabricated, and completely subjective, and that self can be wrong. In moments where the stories we tell ourselves fail to explain the world around us, it forces us to reinvent our individual reality and the way we see and understand the world, and furthermore how we operate within it. With my work I am interested in the functions we give to objects, or *things*, and how this constructed framework affects both our personal and collective conceptions of reality, and how this can change the way we see and interact with the world.

It seems that great shattering moments are not made by doing complicated things, they are simple, showing things that you know, but that you haven't noticed yet. I am not a writer, or a historian, or a philosopher. I am writing this from the perspective of an artist. It is an account of my own subjective understanding of what I do, and how I

2 S. Usborne 'Sucks to be him! How Henry the vacuum cleaner became an accidental design icon' *The Guardian,* 24 Jul. 2021

3 Intermediate+ 'Word of the Day: shatter' *Word Reference*, 15 Sept. 2021 https://daily.wordreference.com/2021/09/15/intermediate-word-of-the-day-shatter/

have come to make the decisions that dictate how, and why, I function as an artist. To explain my practice, I feel it might be useful to define what I think the function of art is. Firstly; to reflect an image of society back upon itself. Secondly: to propose utopic ideas for a possible tomorrow. Obviously, I feel it would be obtuse to not marry either of these two conceptual functions with some sort of sense of aesthetic beauty - we as humans are, above all, emotional beings who are drawn to beauty, *and I myself am definitely a sucker for this*. More recently I've embraced a third function, or role, that art can play; it can show our individual humanity. Art has the ability to remind others that they are not alone, that they are in fact in a world bustling with other sentient beings, and, like - *love, loss, humor, emotion, illness, drugs, religion* and *the natural world*, art has the ability to transform and be a catalyst for the way we understand ourselves and our sense of Being in time – it too can be shattering.

I read a brilliant blog-post years ago from a guy who went to a music festival, I think he was in his early 20's and while he was there he had met someone completely new to him. She'd given him a pill, something he'd never done before, it was most probably ecstasy and when he *came up* he realised for the first time in his life; that other people had feelings too. He said, and who knows if it's true – it was written on a blog – that when he was high he could feel other people's emotions radiating out of their bodies, and at that moment it occurred to him that other people too had feelings, and that changed how he saw the world. I know this story sounds absurd, but that's part of the reason I've included it. We live in an age of individualism where we, in the West, live in our own heads, thinking we are at the centre of everything, playing the lead role in a movie about our own individual selves, with everyone and every*thing* else becoming a prop in our story, forgetting that we are part of something bigger. One of the great fallacies of our time is our inability to see that other people too are experiencing the world differently, in their own personal subjective way.

The late American author Murray Bookchin, when asked about choice in an interview said; "Marx put it very well; human beings make history, but they don't make it on the conditions of their own choosing […] the conditions or the choices available to them [people within society] can be limited very much by material factors, by cultural factors, by traditional factors, by overall historical factors."[4] This is important as we are not all born equal, we are all born into a society, not of our choosing, that forms, through historical structures of categorization and traditions, our frameworks for thinking. Frameworks that our conscious and automatic selves rely on to make us who we are and dictate how we think, act and function in the world. The German philosopher Karl Marx, who Bookchin was referencing, put it in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*; "tradition[s] of the dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living."[5]

One of these traditions that weighs heavily is language. We as humans have a unique ability to converse and think in a logocentric way, however this framework for Being is inherently anthropocentric and affects how we see and interact within the world. James Baldwin, the American writer and civil rights activist, summarised this when he wrote "the root function of language is to control the universe by describing it"[6] - it allows for a mental framework that, along with allowing us to construct the world we know today, can, and has – caused extreme harm in the form of prejudice, bigotry, sexism and racism.[7] It too has abstracted our relationship with the non-linguistic world. The Polish author Olga Tokarczuk wrote in her 2009 novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead:*

> such a person [who wields a pen] is not him or herself, but an eye that's constantly watching, and whatever it sees it changes into sentences; in the process it strips reality of its most essential quality – its inexpressibility.[8]

Throughout the novel Tokarczuk explores the logocentric nature of our gaze and its framework of thinking that is produced by operating within a linguistic system. She looks at how it reduces our scope for rationality and empathy toward the *other*, making the *other* something that can be controlled and manipulated for profit.

There is an argument that when coupled with an entrenched ideological framework, like that of late-capitalism, logocentric thinking can also become a hurdle to the creative process and the ability to imagine change. This forces individuals to think in relation to itemised functionality, even if individuals or groups may disdain or ironize the language by acting with and within "widespread ritualistic compliance with this terminology it […] naturalises its dominance"[9], hampering alternative ways of thinking by neutralising alternatives. In the French mathematician Blaise Pascal's 17th century doctrine; 'Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe' you find historical record of an understanding that our individual psychological beliefs are a product of going through the motions, and that repeated actions, past your childhood, affect how we think, act and experience the world. There's a more contemporary way of phrasing Pascal's doctrine that shows individuals to be unfixed susceptible beings, coined by the late English writer Mark Fisher: "If there is free will, then why do Capitalists spend so much money on advertising?"[10]

If we accept that we are shaped by our experience and our environments after our physical birth, then it poses the question: *how do we have a shattering moment of realization that alters the way we perceive the world, and furthermore how we interact within it from an entrenched societal position?* The English artist and author James

4 M. Bookchin 'Is Success Determined By Choice?' *commietrashh*, video clip, posted 11 Sep. 2023

5 K. Marx 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', Chapter 1, published 1852

6 J. Baldwin 'Notes of a Native Son' Beacon Press, first published 21 Nov. 1955, p.150

7 *Just a little disclaimer* – Language itself hasn't caused this, but it does perpetuate this framework; that of prejudice, bigotry, sexism and racism. A framework people operate subconsciously within and use to understand their place in the world. Language is imposed on people, it's not something they choose, or sometimes even that their ancestors chose (for example with the Atlantic Slave Trade), it carries codified structures of control from the past into the present, unbeknown to many using it as a framework to operate.

8 O. Tokarczuk 'Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead' p.44 – 45, published 25 Nov. 2009

9 M. Fisher 'The Privatisation of Stress', Soundings Magazine issue 48, published 2011

10 M. Fisher 'Cybertime Crisis', YouTube video, published 17 Nov 2020, recorded at HO Gent, Studium Generale in, Belgium in 2013, 1:13:20, https://youtu.be/zOQgCg73sfQ?si=otclFWgTJMUH8z2J

Bridle in their book *Ways Of Being* says; “The driver of change, at the level of the individual […] is the encounter with the other.”[11] Maybe we need an external factor, an *other*, to bring about a shattering moment that can question our image of reality before we can reassemble it into a different mode of thinking and way of Being in the world, for me art can do this by *showing the world for what it is*, or by *showing it for what it could be*; or finally by *showing it through another’s perspective, one that is different from your own* – reminding you that your perception of the world is a product of your alterity – or *otherness*.

11 J. Bridle ‘Ways Of Being’ Penguin Books Limited, published 11 Oct. 2022, p.281

Function

My ideas relating to function come from reading the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, it was his belief that when an object loses its ability to function, it reminds us of our sense of self, or *Being*. For instance, if you take the idea of a kettle and imagine that it loses its function to heat up water, this loss of function causes you to think – *what could this now be?* It could be a myriad of things, *right?* – a jug, a vase, a plant pot… a fish tank, a plinth, a paperweight, a very small bin, even an elaborate hat... Things “become playthings” and in this un-fixed state “you become aware of your body in the world.”[12]

A stripping of function allows you, the viewer, to see a *thing* for what it is, without the shackles of categorization, and maybe more importantly, what it could be. Ultimately if you completely reduce existence down to the bare bones: we are just sentient sacks of water wandering around on a crusty spinning rock while basking in the glory of a burning ball of plasma that’s also cruising through the void of space while we amble around trying to make sense of the abstract nature of reality – *far out*. No wonder we make up stories to be able to function within society.

But in all seriousness; the momentary shattering, or Glitch, in your individual perceived reality, caused by an object’s inability to function, can show reality for what it truly is – *a construct.* It’s this thinking outside of defined and recognized societal and personal reality that gives us the ability to see that, in the words of the late

12 F. West, T. Eccles ‘An audience with Franz West’ *ArtReview,* originally published 2007, republished 19 Oct. 2018

American anthropologist David Graeber; "the ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something we make and could just as easily make differently"[13] - I think that is beautiful.

Heidegger was worried about how, under consumerism, we'd enter a societal way of thinking where "the world is seen as a collection of objects that can be measured, analysed and manipulated for our benefit."[14] If we are born into this system, a system as Bookchin points out, not of our own choosing, then: *can a reinvention of function act as a way to subvert this system, and bring about a shattering moment?*

If we take a small stone for instance: *what could this be?* Recently between 2019 – 2020, students in Hong Kong's protests bestowed a new function of the upmost importance on the little stone – it became; *an anonymity device.* They would place a different stone each day in one of their shoes to alter their way of walking, disguising their unconscious movements to evade identification from surveillance software. This simple allocation of function to the small stone was able to trick the authorities and *sabotage* their advanced technological systems' ability to function in the recognition and categorization of people.

And sabotage is coincidently the perfect word for this act as it derives from the French *'saboter'* – originally used to refer to labour disputes, in which workers wearing wooden shoes called *'sabots'* interrupted production. It has been reported that workers would throw their shoes into the machines to disrupt production and cause a breakdown of the period's most revolutionary technology – the loom.

Throughout history new technology has always been a catalyst to bring about shattering moments that redefine the way people see the world, both good and bad. Technology has always been wielded as a tool of power, but also in acts of resistance. Take for example the *small stone* in Hong Kong and the *sabots* in France, technologies that were used as 'duct-tape-esque' solutions to resist against an oppressing state and, however momentarily, *level the playing field*. Just look at what happened with the fleeting power WikiLeaks gave to whistleblowers like Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning – they became the rock-stars of my generation. At one point it seemed as if this new technology had given the individual the power to hold a state to account. It felt to me like a shattering thing to witness. Although WikiLeaks collapsed, it shows the immense power a technology can have as an act of resistance.

It feels like we're actually going through a shattering moment right now, as the English journalist Clive Martin pointed out recently; "when television first came about they said it was 'a window to the world'. If that's true, then social media is a peephole, a grubby little orifice in the wall of reality that we can stare into whenever we're feeling unedified."[15] I think this has become increasingly apparent over the past few years, we are all carrying around little portals into cyberspace that allow us to see a mass of 'content', *yes* - it's curated by an algorithm, but it's a complete mess, juxtaposing the war in Ukraine with spiritual-stone-healing, or footage from inside Gaza with TikTok dances. There is no coherent story. But what we can see through the chaos is war happening in real-time, and that completely undermines anything espoused on the television news or coming from the state. That too is shattering.

> Everyone can see the reality of what's happening on the ground, it's actually a phenomenon associated with social media, there is no longer a filter, there's no longer a control of the information, you can just see the video, you're seeing it happen. And there's a disconnect between the reality you can see and the discourse; whether it's in; the political class, in the media class, or large parts of culture, and that disconnect is, politically, a dangerous thing because you have a large group of people thinking why aren't you talking about the thing I can see with my own eyes […] and because the people who should be talking about it aren't then it creates a vacuum[16]

And that vacuum draws new people and ideas into this void. We all need something to make sense of the wold we inhabit and when the narrative becomes too absurd and disconnected from reality people turn for answers from alternative sources – good or bad.

This too is what happened in Hong Kong. The state employed a new technology to identify the protesters, and this put their anonymity and ability to protest the state at risk. It changed the way people saw society, turning it into a terrifyingly absurd reality, disconnected from their immediate past and forced people to turn for answers to alternative sources. Into that void came a new idea, a new technology, a new function for an existing *thing*, transforming a little stone into a revolutionary technology.

Another example, but this time coming from the state, was during the imposed Cuban sanctions in the 1990's. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Cuba entered a phase of profound economic disaster and embraced a state-sponsored shift in mentality to break, take-apart and reconfigure objects, repurposing broken electronics into hearing aids, lawnmowers into mopeds, homebrewing car fuel, creating make-shift television antennas from aluminum foil trays and even preparing 'grapefruit steak'.

This change in attitude to function was imposed by an external force, in the form of sanctions by an external *other.* That act rendered technologies – *often described today as so beyond the pale of quotidian human understanding* – as nothing more than playthings to be reconfigured into some*thing* else. It proves that given the freedom to, people will find their own codes, their own realities. In fact, people are always up to their own tricks: when encouraged to, engaging with objects through novel,

13 D. Graeber 'The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy' Melville House, published 24 Feb. 2015, p.89

14 'Two Modes Of Thinking In Heidegger Calculative And Meditative Thinking' *Philonotes,* published 7 April 2023

15 C. Martin 'Return Of The Idiot' *The Face*, published 16 Dec. 2022

16 B. Youssef, O. Dugmore 'Bassem Youssef on Palestine: The West is terrified of Israel' *Politics Joe,* published 3 Apr, 2024, 40:00

spontaneous and experimental channels. Art, it would seem, is also particularly attuned to this sensibility. Taking things apart and creating anew. Manufacturing new worlds. *After all, what could be any less mysterious than something you have created, yourself?* The necessity to change the function of certain *objects* is externally imposed in all these cases – be that by the state, or a new technology, or a foreign superpower. Yet, at the same time in acts of resistance the allocation of new function too was instigated by certain individuals and minority groups with alterity – or *otherness* – before their ideas were adopted by a wider group – we as individuals have *otherness*.

Heidegger's ideas on function always makes me recall a passage from the German philosopher Walter Benjamin's *One Way Street* titled "Construction Site," where he writes:

> In waste products they [children] recognise the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artefacts produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater ones.[17]

The children see the construction site's trash for what it could be, without the gaze of functionality or categorization. They are free to individually create their own understanding of the world and the things within it.

A few years ago, I had a similar experience to the children in Benjamin's "Construction Site", I used to live in an industrial part of London, near a salvage metal yard. Big heavy trucks would roll down the road everyday carrying big skips full of scrap metal, sometimes things would fall out and be flattened by the trucks. I'd often pick them up. I once found a completely flattened spoon, it'd lost its ability to function as a spoon and had become something else, something new, something I'd never seen before. So, I kept it. The best thing I found was a squashed wire bowl, probably used as a fruit bowl or something similar, completely flat, the wires rearranged as if they had lost all rigidity, yet strong enough to hold its new shape. But like the spoon, robbed of its function, completely unable to hold anything but it's new shape.

I felt like a magpie. Looking for *things* stripped of their function, new things free to become anything. I think that's what I do in my artistic practice. I scour markets, skips, the streets, pop culture and the internet looking for materials and *things* to use, to break apart and re-configure into new things. This way of working is, in essence a way of trying to understand our current moment in time, after all, what could be less mysterious than something you have created, *yourself?* You need a certain amount of luck to work like this, but maybe more importantly you need to be open to the possibilities of what you find, what the world gives you and the ability to embrace your *otherness* and find value in the reasons you once felt strange.

17 W. Benjamin 'One Way Street' published as a book in 1928, chapter/section Construction Site

It reminds me of something the American author Philip K. Dick wrote in his 1981 novel *VALIS*: "Symbols of the divine show up in our world initially at the trash stratum."[18] It's been something that I've kept coming back to. *Maybe we need this open 'childlike' gaze to see the divine in the detritus, to help us find and build solutions with what we have at hand and conceive of truly new and different futures?*

18 P. K. Dick 'Valis' Bantam Books, 1981, chapter 14, p.159

Loss Of Modal Thinking

Loss of modal thinking on a wider plane than just one object losing its function, can be devastating. This shattering of one's own personal framework was captured in the 1969 science fiction novel *Ubik*. Also written by Dick, it tells the story of a man who starts to experience reality breaking down. For Joe Chip, the protagonist, after an explosion, things progressively slip into a state of confusion where the world he inhabits becomes a dark, chaotic and disconcerting place. Chip experiences a complete entropy of the logical rational idea of *things* - where they become former conceptions of themselves. It is by all means a difficult and confusing book with no concrete answers, yet at the same time it is unbelievably brilliant as it captures, from the protagonist's personal perspective, the degradation of one man's perception of the world.

In the novel, there is a temporary antidote to the entropy. It comes in the form of a spray-can. When applied to *things* ubik, *it shares the name with the novel* – acts as a temporary "counter time-regression [device]"[19] – restoring things back to their former conceived state, or according to Joe Chip - their *normal* state. There are many theories as to what Dick meant ubik to symbolize. Some people think it could be a metaphor for God, or religion. Or for the use of drugs and addiction. While others hypothesize Dick was trying to talk about consumer capitalism of the 1960's and the American people's dependence on money as a way of rationalizing the world around them. That when the money stops, our conception of reality breaks down completely.

I think this idea coming from *Ubik* is particularly relevant today and might explain the feeling of stagnation we are living through. Since the financial crash in 2008, when the money stopped after the bailing out of the banks and imposed austerity, people's stable idea of reality stopped making sense. The idea that; *if you work hard you can progress through a system of social mobility and have enough money to buy a house and live a comfortable life* – this idea has been shattered and the story people have been telling themselves, as an underlying framework so that they can function within society, has stopped making sense, leading to a widespread societal malaise and distrust of any form of governance or power. With this, the idea of a possible future has dissipated. In the UK no one talks about plans for a possible tomorrow, just repeating that; *we've got to get through the next few years* – it's been like this for 16 years now, it's absurd.

The British theatre director James McDonald, who is currently directing a version of the Irish playwright and novelist Samuel Beckett's 1954 play *Waiting For Godot* in the West End of London, describes the play as:

> two men who have absolutely nothing, waiting for something. It contains great joy and intense irritation. I think it's a metaphor for what all our lives are like, we just have to find ways of entertaining ourselves faced with a world that won't give us any answers, a person who won't come along.[20]

It feels like we, like the two protagonists; Estragon and Vladimir in Beckett's play, are somehow trapped in limbo, waiting for something, or someone to come along with a new story and conception of reality that can make sense of the strange, unequal, chaotic and disconcerting present, *but hey at least they have each other – and so do we!*

> Estragon - I can't go on like this.
>
> Vladimir - That's what you think.[21]

The English political journalist and documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis has a really funny way of describing this current mood; "they [the politicians] know, that we know, that they don't know what's going on"[22] – I think this is great, it's like a pop song in its phrasing that captures the complete absurdity of our current moment in time. He has a hypothesis that individualism is why we, in the West, can't, as advocated by Graeber, construct things differently:

> If you do live in a world where you just follow your own desires, then when things

19 S. Jordison 'Philip K Dick's Ubik: a masterpiece of malleability' *The Guardian,* published 18 Mar. 2014

20 J. McDonald 'Sneak Peek: Waiting for Godot starring Ben Wishaw and Lucian Msamati' *These Theatre Thoughts,* YouTube video, 00:23, https://youtu.be/EN5SOM5g5Ds?si=-PuiYw-h_PlOUCe_

21 S. Beckett 'Waiting for Godot' play premiered Théâtre de Babylone [fr] 5 Jan. 1953, p.87-88

22 A. Curtis 'Adam Curtis on the fall of the Soviet Union's worrying parallels with modern Britain' *Politics Joe*, published 19 Oct. 2022, 06:42, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=663vLIYBcpI&t=782s

> go well it's really wonderful […] but when things go wrong it's really scary, it's like being in the woods on your own, it's frightening. You're not with your friends in the woods because that's exciting, you're on your own […] and that's disempowering […] Tiktok is absolutely obsessed by personal trauma. It's all about; there must be something inside you, that's making you feel bad […] what's stopping us imagining a better world and a better future is this idea, that somehow the reason we feel bad is because there's something bad inside us, and that's so disempowering. And to be honest, well it may be true in a number of cases, it's also possibly true that the reason you feel bad is because you live in a shitty society.[23]

It's like you are sitting on a train, looking at a window with headphones on, completely *zoned out* to what's going on around you, fixated on your own reflection and unaware where you are going. In this state you are oblivious of what's happening through the pane of glass, or what is going on behind, or beside you. We have the ability to look through the glass into the oncoming future or turn our head to see what is happening in the room around us and ask someone *where we are going?,* we even have the agency to stand up and get off the train and walk outside in a direction of our own choosing and to board another vessel going in a direction we desire, rather than just sitting transfixed by our own reflected self with no direction or plan for the future.

It has become near impossible to give yourself up to anything bigger. I've found that applies to relationships as well. Progressively people are less and less willing to give themselves up to anything bigger. Everything is a *'situationship'* – it's undefined and thus nothing ever ends, it all just blurs into a mess where nobody reveals how they really feel or gets to say goodbye. *I don't know if it's related to the changing technological landscape of app dating?* It's hard to get your heart broken when you don't give it to anyone. I think this is the crux of the problem. If change can only come from the encounter with the *other* then living inside your own head and alienating yourself from other people is dangerous because when something encroaches on your individual freedom, or liberty, you can change yourself to fit into this new world, but you can't come together with *others* to push back this encroaching force and change the framework and situation into something you collectively want. It's no wonder the mantra of our age is; *"I'm working on myself"*. We should know what we want, not just what we don't want and to know what we collectively want we need to be willing to give up our idea of our individual self.

I even see this with the clothes people wear, or with the possessions they have. People want to keep everything looking unmodified so that they can re-sell it - we're living in a world where nothing is yours, just rented, where you can hold it for a while before selling it on. The French critic Nicolas Bourriaud wrote in *Relational Aesthetics* "for anything that cannot be marketed will inevitably vanish […] the social bond has turned into a standardised artefact."[24] But I think human beings are inherently fallible, emotional beings and the social bond holds one key to shattering moments

23 A. Curtis, O. Dugmore 'Adam Curtis on the fall of the Soviet Union's worrying parallels with modern Britain' *Politics Joe*, published 19 Oct. 2022, 22:00

24 N. Bourriaud 'Relational Aesthetics' Les Presses du réel, published 1989, p.9

that allow us to break out of a framework of thinking and inherently change the way we see and interact with the world. The American sociologist Sherry Turkle states in her book *Alone Together* that she believes "the absence of emotion reduces the scope of rationality because we literally think with our feelings."[25] I know from my own life that I have been changed profoundly by people in it and the feeling I hold for them. This too is echoed by Bridle; "that what matters resides in relationships rather than things"[26] I love this.

There is another argument, that our collective feeling of individuality is in fact actually just a façade hiding another reality. According to the argument, we are just one part of a wider societal body rather than our individual selves, that we are in fact completely dependent on others. Just one part of a wider body politic, this façade is tricking us into giving up our collective agency and with it our ability to question how we operate in the world. In the 1920's Heidegger, whose ideas relating to functions I've touched on already, predicted that under "standardized life and death"[27] of the oncoming Western age of consumerism; we would become one part of society rather than our true individual selves, and that this loss of individual freedom would make it "almost impossible for you to be you and not just one."[28] He believed you, in your own nature and thinking, would become restrained by societal modes of thinking, not of your own choosing, and thus lose individual freedom of thought and *otherness*.

Although this is an abstract idea, on the level of society, it might not be as abstract as we think, in essence it has actually been put into practice online by companies like Meta and Google in the way they track your online activity as data, and then use this data to group you together into categories with other similar individuals. This affects the content you see and the products you are advertised. This personalization of ads and media to the categorized individual, along with making Meta and Google very wealthy, is acting as a new form of broadcasting, stopping you from being you, and making you, unknowingly, just one of a specified group – making the idea of the individual just an illusion.

This loss of our own individual alterity, and the power that gives us to come up with truly original creative ideas that allow us to join together with other individuals to bring about different ways of Being in the world, is a really bad thing. Personal agency and *otherness* is a brilliant thing for society but *is that lost when we are so heavily categorized into algorithmic niches?*

One way I can see to shatter this idea of the algorithmic 'individual' is to remind us how susceptible we are to the world. I quoted Bridle earlier in this text, and I omitted the middle of this forthcoming quote, I have underlined what was redacted previously; "The driver of change, at the level of the individual and at the level of evolution, is the

25 S. Turkle 'Alone Together' Hachette UK, published 11 Jan. 2011, p.134

26 J. Bridle 'Ways Of Being' Penguin Books Limited, published 11 Oct. 2022, p.48

27 'Human, All Too Human' *BBC* 18:12 episode 2, first broadcast 1999

28 Ibid

encounter with the other."[29] I think it's absurd that we forget we are part of society, and even more absurd; that we are but one part of the natural world. One thing I was shocked to read in *Ways Of Being* was that; "50% of the human genome consists of DNA written into it by other organisms."[30] I found that incredible. To be honest I could hardly believe it. It had never occurred to me that; not only our minds, but so much of our DNA is shaped by our environments, and the other beings we share it with – all be it mostly our genealogical past – but a genealogical past that still dictates who we are today. Personally, reading that too felt shattering.

29 J. Bridle 'Ways Of Being' Penguin Books Limited, published 11 Oct. 2022, p.281
30 Ibid, p.50

Fecundity

My Dad told me he and his friend were watching TV on the 31st December 1976, completely broke and freezing cold somewhere in London. They had nothing, no money to turn on the heating, no money for booze or food, the way he paints the picture it was completely miserable. In the UK traditionally, they have a night of live televised music performances to celebrate New Year's Eve and all the people who didn't go out to a concert or go partying would stay up and watch it to *see in* the New Year. He tells me that he was watching Freddie Mercury from Queen drinking champagne when he thought *this doesn't represent me*.

At the time music was still heralded as a radical form of expression that captivated, in vast numbers, the hearts and minds of the people and through that emotive connection it could change society. Back then there was money in the music industry and you could see it. But society was bankrupt, and the people on the other side of the screen were broke. My Father says at that moment, while watching TV on New Year's Eve, it felt like everyone on the other side of the screen was at a party that he wasn't invited to, and for him, and a lot of his friends, it changed their idea of music completely, it stopped being something that represented and informed their lives, it lost all meaning, and into that void came Punk Rock with the ethos of 'rip it up and start again' and he went and traded in all his records and became a Punk.

There are moments where we shatter our way of seeing the world. By doing so it allows us to pick up the pieces and construct a new way of Being. In 1976 there were three big weekly music papers; NME, Sounds and Melody Maker who had a collective monopoly on the market. What they said held significant weight and dictated the music scene in the UK. In 1976 they didn't change, and disillusioned music fans decided they too had to be torn down. This feeling that music no longer represented the people gave birth to a DIY movement that sprung up, it reinvented the music press, and saw small independent record labels and distribution networks established because the people stopped believing in the incumbent system. In those acts they challenged the idea of what music was and through the DIY mentality brought about real cultural change and forced music into becoming something that represented and informed how they felt again.

Today, I think that's somewhat unimaginable. To give yourself completely to something. Something new. I think it sounds brilliant. But when I ask any of my friends what kind of music they like, they'll shrug and say a bit of everything. Bookchin talks about a similar feeling of emptiness at the end of the 1960s; "when you love everybody, you don't love anybody in particular."[31] At that moment too, the dream of real social change disappeared, and became a performative spectacle, like the music scene in England in 1976. The dream of a more equal way of Being fell apart because it had become about something else, something that didn't represent the people whose minds the collective idea lived in. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who was a big admirer of Heidegger's way of thinking, thought "that individuals are trapped by a narrow and bleak idea of freedom, by the pressures of society around them. To achieve true freedom one has to find ways to break through this illusion"[32] – shattering moments of dissonance that shows the façade for what it is, leaving a void for something new to come into.

Today we are obsessed with the idea of the individual genius. It fits with our framework of thinking. But Elon Musk or Sam Altman aren't going to save us. What is going to save us is societal fecundity – the ability to produce an abundance of new ideas. Bookchin has a theory on how a society should foster this:

> Consensus mutes dissonance […] minorities and the right to form factions, and the right to dispute, and to organize around issues in opposition from one point of view to another […] the right to have this is the only way you can have a creative body politic because it is invariably, or almost invariably, the fact that by dispute, by the absence of consensus, by an attempt to cultivate minorities, and to let them function freely as minorities in an organized way is the only way we can produce a creative society. We had to be able to create, and to be able to create we had to cultivate the minorities - that come out often with the most advanced points of view.[33]

31 M. Bookshin 'Murray Bookchin on the New Left' *FreiheitXXI,* YouTube video, 1:24:28, https://youtu.be/3hwaFifg-7cU?si=y0-FMhJ_oSgjmy3V

32 'The Trap' *BBC,* first broadcast 11 Mar. 2007, episode 3, 43:42

33 M. Bookshin 'One of Murray Bookchin's last Interviews (2004)' Пряка демокрация, YouTube video, 38:00, https://youtu.be/f8fdPbLeQvE?si=X4drWa_XvBaAqfXY

If we take the protesters in Hong Kong, they were able to come together to create a new way of operating, a new technology to help them function in a changed reality. An idea that came from an individual, or minority faction of society that broke into the mainstream. A stone in a shoe is a technology. A surveillance system is a technology. A framework for understanding our place in the world is a technology. I think we need to remind ourselves that: technology is something we make and just as easily could make differently. Technologies institutionalize us into ways of Being. Yet we all have the ability to make technology. We should embrace that and our *otherness.* And embrace a world with a fecundity of technology rather than a world driven by homogeny and monopoly – as that will inevitably lead to totalitarianism.

I have a wall progressively filling up with post-it-notes in front of me while I write this. I want to express what I find interesting and what I explore through my artistic practice. How our own personal interpretations of the world are clouded by the frameworks we use to function in society, and what that does to the way we understand our place in the world, and how we can reformulate these frameworks to shape our own personal realities and ways of Being differently. I want to know how function, or the loss of it, or a change to it, can be liberating and function as an act of resistance against a system of control. Because in essence what a change is doing, is challenging our way of thinking. That is what I find interesting. I think that is the crux of the information stored on the little coloured squares, in words you are reading now and, in the ideas governing my art.