

## **Art, Technology and Ideation**

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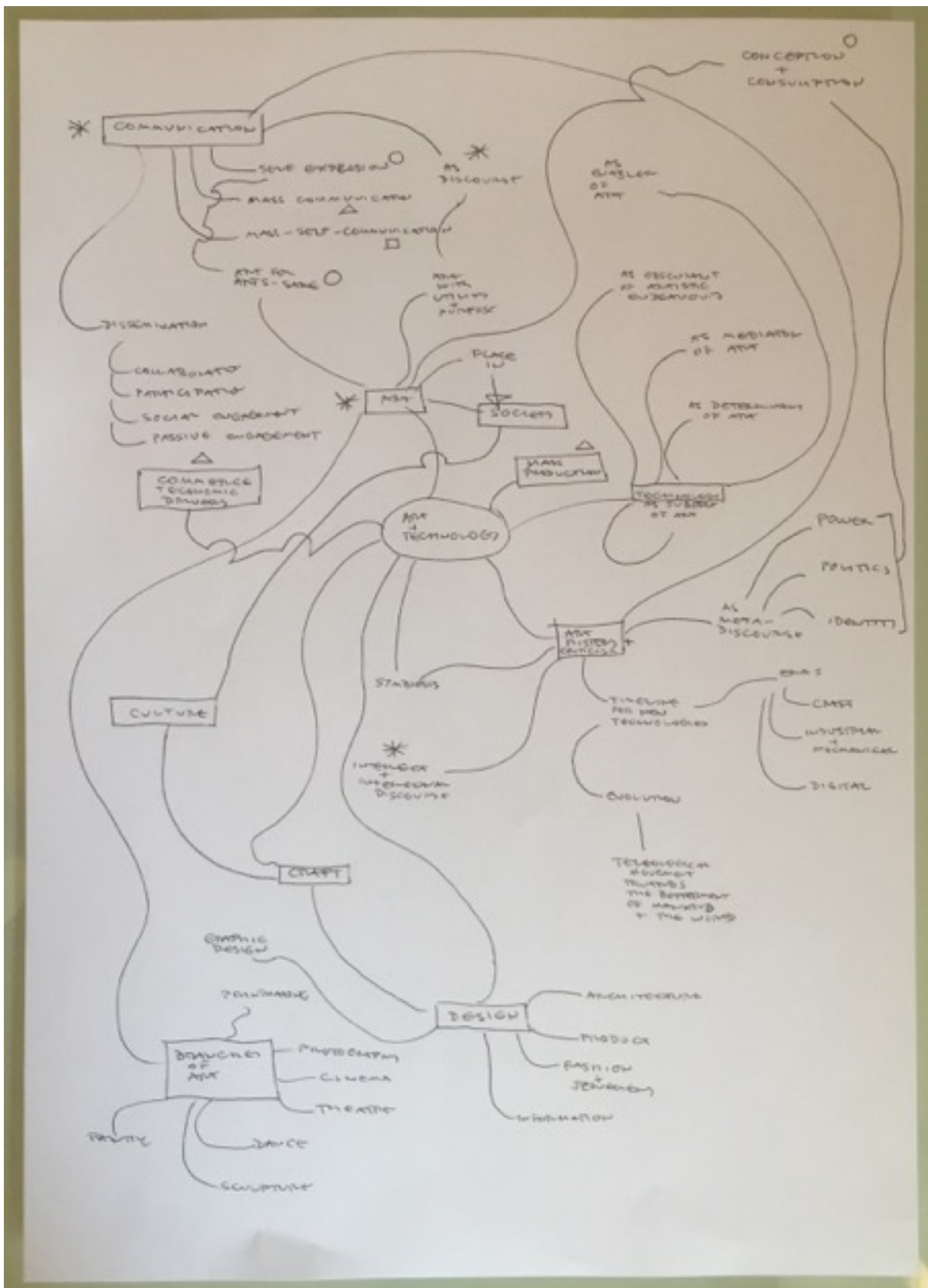
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# Art, Technology and Ideation

Geff Green, October 17th, 2017, Keynote,  
 The 5th International Conference for Asia Pacific Arts Studies (ICAPAS):  
 'Technologies of Art', Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Keywords Chart/Mindmap:



This is a piece of 'Art' I purchased in Indonesia about 25 years ago. It is from Sulawesi and is manufactured on a strap-loom. This is a piece of technology allowing the production of functional materials which can be visualised in various ways. To me this is art, as I the consumer have chosen to regard it in that way, but others including the person who produced it may describe it as craft. The key point with this however is the use of technology to produce a decorative artefact, but which may also have functions which go beyond decoration in its original context and certainly in the way it is displayed on my wall, it has become art in my mind with resonances of its decorative tessellations, its 'traditional' origins and its techniques and technologies of production.



To continue with this theme, I have a current PhD student from Surabaya who is looking at body-art (or tattoos). A very traditional and ancient art form which has had function and meaning in many traditional contexts such as with the Dayaks in South East Asia and the Maori in New Zealand. Tattooing has become industrialised by machinery and inks, but also is increasingly being legitimised, disseminated and visually influenced by Mass and Social media.



These are two distinct levels in which technology is playing a part in the transformation of traditional art-forms along with allowing the development of new ones. I will focus on both the impact of technology on ideation and production of artwork, but also the influence of new media technologies on dissemination and diffusion of art and culture.

Art in a Western context emerged conceptually from 'craft' in parallel with, and probably as a direct consequence of the emergence of what we refer to as the the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Art became increasingly untethered from its dependence on religion as a subject and religious institutions as patrons. Its traditional function of disseminating religious ideology in a Christian context has been turned to much broader communicative and commercial ends during the last few centuries in the West. It is arguable that the new digital revolution which has emerged in my lifetime is another industrial revolution. I imagine that changes which emerge from this new phase of modernity are to a great extent what are under discussion at this conference. In addition to this, the way these technologies may have relevance in a more localised sense on Indonesian cultural contexts must also be of interest and possibly concern to those who are present.



I am fundamentally a cultural historian, but I am also a practitioner who has engaged in musical production and performance, but also, the more traditional arts of painting, drawing, printmaking,



photography and some batik work. All of these activities have made use of industrially manufactured products which I have sought to use in new ways. As an educationalist, a key question for me is whether, my generation, whose learning and activities have spanned pre and post-digital technology, is advantaged or disadvantaged by learning in a more analogue context where means of production, dissemination and promotion of our work were more limited? Do new technologies narrow-down and determine our creative options, ideas and outputs and more importantly does it narrow-down the ideas of those newly emerging artists who perhaps did not learn the traditional dark room practices, typography, painting, etching etc?

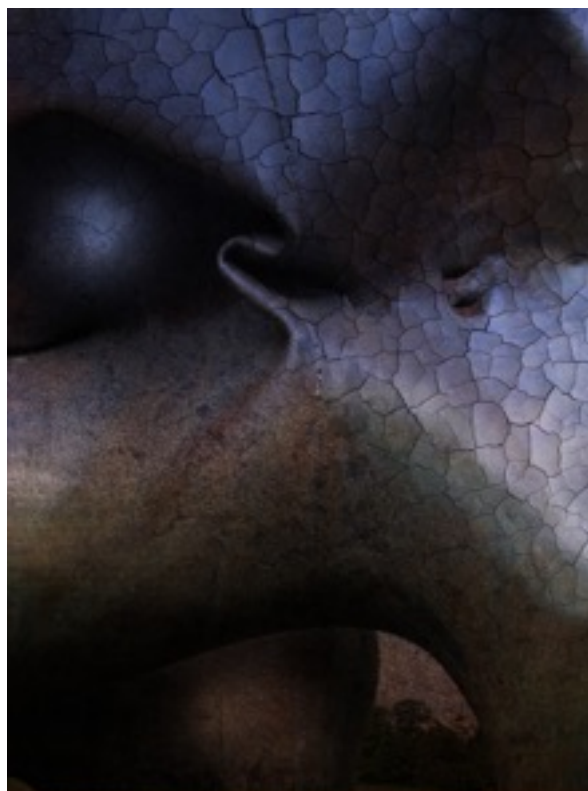
A key reason I have embarked on studying and understanding cultural history and ethnography in a global and cultural sense is to try to be a better artist both in terms of what I am able to produce, but also in terms of being able to explain my work, better interpret the work of others and as a teacher often to help students to fully recognise the scope of meaning and potentiality in their own work. In other words, my view is that conceptual mastery of what we do in an academic context is crucially important in formulating, creating, understanding, explaining and justifying our work. Perhaps more broadly in the commercial art-world of galleries and international marketplaces for Art (including online media and publication), this approach is also important.

Of course, art historians such as Clement Greenberg have also served the purpose of legitimising the 'primitive' in art as produced by the abstract expressionists such as Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock (Spalding, 2003, p. 29). This often also became entangled with the idea of Art and Capitalism. The notion that Art should 'speak for itself' as a form of free expression is a view I have encountered from artists outside the academy. At the same time as art historians and art critics 'adding value' to artists work, they are often treated with suspicion because of providing a particular parallel narrative which appears to speak for the artist and their art which either competes with the artists' own meta-narrative or possible attempts to fill an explanatory void which has been deliberately or accidentally left by the artist. This is a good reason why artists themselves should equip themselves to fill this void in a meaningful and comprehensible way. There are contemporary artists who are particularly articulate in being able to explain their work with a seemingly high level of self awareness. People such as Grayson Perry appear to



effortlessly conceptualise and explain their work, effectively communicating an idea of set of issues in two parallel and complementary systems of communication.

In terms of my own creative output, I am not especially satisfied that I have yet consistently achieved what I have set-out to do, but what I have done in a historical way is develop themes and ideas and approaches prior to technologies existing which could readily realise them. I have then had ideas, and concepts which were ready-made when the technologies arrived which allowed me to make use of them through recognising their potential to realise a pre-formed idea and even philosophical or ideological message. However, I also must recognise that a creative, constructive and intellectual internal dialogue can take place while making or using the technology itself (the idea of making as thinking) and that is the case even with the formative ideas which I have mentioned above. But again, the sophistication and productivity of that dialogue, I argue, needs to draw upon other learning, experiences and intellectual activities which have preceded the process of making, or at least take place at some distance from them. The better the quality and diversity of these inputs which may have very little technological dimension to them, the better the internal dialogue and the better the final product plus the explanatory discourse which the artist can produce to accompany the work. If you like, it is about using the best materials or assets to produce artworks. This includes concepts, ideas and philosophies as much as it includes good photographic technique, clay, software or glue.



What I have presented above is a form of generalisation and there will be inevitably exceptions which could be found to what has been suggested, but in an educational context and probably in a broader creative context, I argue that this is a meaningful and practicable philosophical approach to artistic creativity and the use of tools and technologies to produce artistic outputs.

Ultimately, conceptual mastery of your own themes, genres and ideas as an artist will allow a product which is not technologically determined by interface or metaphor for instance (Photoshop is an example of this). I argue that these often need to be developed with a degree of separation from technologies whose mass market and mass market appeal is normatively defined by the manufacturer based on what could be justified as common commercial usage, but whose usage in the first place becomes defined by the technologies' affordances. With *The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin proposed the democratisation of art in parallel to a diminishing of the

'Aura' of the traditional artwork. This arose from the Frankfurt school's thinking in response to the early rise of mass broadcast media. In the digital era, with the means of production being available to all, the paradigm has changed and potentially liberates us all to be proponents and practitioners of Manuel Castell's Mass self-communication (Castells, 2009). But the danger is that the means of production have a uniformity which in themselves limit creativity, new ideas and potentially necessary political and social change which at least some Art should be addressing. So these technologies should probably be used disruptively and subversively in terms of the visual outputs created through them. We should also disrupt the technical orthodoxies of image or audio-making which exist in the way these are taught, and that are ideologically built-in to the way in which they are designed.

So, to go back to my original example. The kind of strap-loom used to make the *ikat* weaving is many thousands of year old and is something which is found over many regions of the world, indicating either a spread by human diffusionism or possibly individual isolated invention of the same idea in different parts of the world. The motifs and conceptual/ritual purposes of the items produced differ quite significantly. So, despite the limitation in image-making in its broader sense which is presented by technology itself, a great deal of diversity of ideas have been brought to the loom and so for instance, the Iban of Sarawak have mentioned the importance of dreams/ visions when coming-up with new designs, motifs and combinations of visual elements (Gavin, 2004, p. 252). Thus we have a process which relates to repetition of design and production work which is in some way embedded into their productive experience, but which relies on ideation, taking place away from the loom itself. It also perhaps brings the creativity closer to the spiritual realm as experienced in the world of dreams or *mimpi*.

The dissemination and exhibition of work provides both opportunities and threats to both ownership and product itself. Something which drew me to the World Wide Web when I first encountered it in 1994 was its visuality and the possibilities it allowed for global publication and exhibition of artistic imagery both in the form of art historical research and in digital visual artefacts themselves. Similarly, as new digital music technology emerged, the possibility to generate musical notation and



later to interchange this with midi technologies and ultimately the bundling and integration of this with musical samplers, effects and multitrack studio recording technologies, has presented exciting new creative horizons. But undoubtedly, the efforts of the large

software companies to control the distribution and marketing of intellectual property on their own terms and through their own channels presents significant challenges for artists and musicians. So even when mastering the possible technological determinism presented by Logic Pro, Adobe CC and many others, the ability to maintain ownership and control of your own products and ideas needs to be carefully managed. Currently, protocol for behaviour and management of one's own professional identity are still ongoing cultural projects with opportunistic software and social media providers seeking to mould behaviour and channel present and future revenue and Intellectual Property into their coffers. This goes hand-in-hand with capturing mass-audiences as loyal customers for their hardware, software and associated creative outputs.

Because of the commercial marketing of digital tools with the strong potential for normative outputs discussed above, it seems especially important for some artists to be technologically and scientifically knowledgeable and to find ways of intervening in outputs which undermine the limitations of software interfaces designed to repeat, reproduce and emulate the old-world products and outputs. Despite having done some coding and programming in the past, this has not enabled me to work at a specially deep level to visualise or manipulate data in new and creative ways. Technical and mechanical insight also needs to be part of the brew which feeds the conceptual thinking to allow really interesting and innovative art to emerge from the technological toolkits of software, virtual reality, mechanical engineering, LED display technology, artificial intelligence and numerical data itself. Interventions by artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Gustav Metzler have been characteristic of experimental art going back to the 1960s. I remember as a 5 year-old visiting the seminal *Cybernetic Serendipity* exhibition in London in the late 60s and shaking hands with a primitive Robot. We can see further innovations with groups like Kraftwerk in Germany manufacturing their own electronic instruments which were used to fashion their own distinct musical sound in the 1970s and early 1980s. The temptation now is to use the sophisticated products on the market to bypass the baseline possibilities of technologies and to avoid the struggle of designing and building technological art from the ground up. However, the work of the artists mentioned above illustrates the raw and sometimes crude power which emerges from escaping the slick, industrially manufactured products of today and subverting their putative function and purpose. It has been demonstrated that this can be done in both subtle and emphatic ways.

It is hard not to engage with any discussion of Modern art without referring to Marcel Duchamp because of his highlighting and embracing of the conceptual in art, to the degree of abandoning making and production altogether, with the notion that the articulation of the idea itself is enough, leaving no real need to a material product or at the very least putting "painting once again at the service of the mind" (Duchamp quoted in Chipp, 1968, p. 394). Perhaps more importantly as a final thought, we should be asking the question how can technology allow art to be more socially engaged to intervene, influence and sometimes disrupt cultural norms in the new digital and digitally-influenced public spheres? It has also to be remembered that our industrial and scientific developments have had toxic results for individuals, communities and nations. Thus,



environmentalism and sustainability need to inform the ethical agenda of any art forms which engage with technology. My anachronistic example of weaving, which I started with, is work which is socially and culturally engaged with specific roles and identities attached to production and consumption and these often include culturally embedded sustainable practices for living. My most recent work on my *Cities of Sanctuary* project is seeking to develop ways of creating both meaningful artefacts which are socially engaged and collaborative which rely on technology for their production, but also the means of disseminating and sharing these outputs. The latter is a difficult thing to do in a world of cat-videos, commercial Vloggers and pornography which continue to flood the Internet and attract the attention of a large proportion of its users. However, I would be interested to hear and learn from others at this conference how they negotiate their creative practice and engagement in the current technological environment, as well as how they seek to intervene and disrupt the conventional uses and paradigms of the multiple strands of technology whose possibilities have yet to be explored for non-industrial and creative uses.

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### **images:**

Fig. 1 *Provisional Mindmap for Art & Technology*: © Geff Green, 2017

Fig. 2 *Ikat weaving*, artist unknown, date unknown, origin: Sulawesi, photographed by Geff Green, 2017

Fig. 3 *Arwa Bebek*, tattoo, artist unknown, Surabaya, photographed by Constantius Handoko, 2013

Fig. 4 *Industrial Patterns*, photoshopmontage: © Geff Green, Sheffield, 2009

Fig. 5 *Robot in the Architecture*, photograph: © Geff Green, Nagoya, 2007

Fig. 6 *Beholding the Moon*, Batik painting: © Geff Green, Sheffield, 1985

Fig. 7 *Medieval Dream City*, Steel Plate Etching: © Geff Green, France, 1994

Fig. 8 *Grayson Perry, Portrait*, 2014, photograph: © Pål Hanson

Fig. 9 *Metallic Beast*, photoshopmontage: © Geff Green, Sheffield, 2010

Fig. 10 *Walter Spies Paintings: Java, Bali, Sumatra*, website , Geff Green, 2006 (screen-capture)