

**The Art of Homo machinos:
Creative Expression and Evolution in the 21st Century
By Mitchell Van Duzer**

One of the most confounding things for me as an artist, and one of the issues I have had to seriously face as a result of my interest in an artistic livelihood, is the great ambiguity surrounding the role of art in contemporary society. Growing up, I was taught to admire people like Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Monet, Van Gogh, Picasso, and Dali. These were names that immediately conjured up traditional romantic visions of “the artist”: someone in a studio, sitting at an easel with a palette in one hand and a brush in the other. That was what art was supposed to be—or so, in my youthful innocence, I thought. As I got older and my knowledge of art history became more extensive, I developed a great affinity for modern art, and added more names to the list: Kahlo, Rivera, Siqueiros, Pollock, Krasner, De Kooning, Magritte (a personal favorite), Bacon, Oldenburg, Rauschenberg, Johns, Lichtenstein, and of course, Warhol. Even to this day, if I were to be asked about “art”, those names would float up from the back of my mind first. All of the aforementioned people have left their indelible marks on the popular consciousness, so much so that they have forever become *synonymous*, in public discourse, with “art”. Now, if you would ask me who makes “art” *today*, I could name names—Christo would probably be the first—but admittedly it would take me a moment longer. This is, I think, the root of the problem I see facing the budding artists of my generation: we have no sense of personal identity, and no footsteps to follow. The purpose of this essay is to give my fellow Generation Y art aspirants a voice and a guide, and to help outside observers understand us and the social climate that has shaped us.

Speaking from my own experience, being an artist today is at times frustrating and at times absolutely terrifying. Sometimes I get the distinct feeling that I am stumbling blindly through a dark tunnel, with no landmarks to help guide me out into the light. I have at times felt, and I’m sure I’m not alone, unsure of where this road is leading me. However, historically the rule has always been that understanding where we’re going hinges upon understanding where we have been already, and I feel that is no less true now. This brings us back to Mr. Warhol.

Warhol is, in my opinion, one of the most radical artists to have ever lived, not simply during the Modern movement, but in all of Western art history. His ideas still resonate today, and his philosophy of artistic populism was so revolutionary in its reinvention of art itself that entire subsequent generations of artists have struggled to understand their place in the new configuration. For Warhol, the idea was to dispel the mythos surrounding artists—to debunk the romantic vision I mentioned in the first paragraph—so that *everyone* could be an artist, *everyone* could have his or her fifteen minutes, and the old system of lionizing an elite core of artists from different movements would become obsolete. In addition, Warhol created an acceptance of the mundane and commercial as subject matter in a niche that once viewed itself as above such things. Hence, “pop” became a standard defining element of 20th Century art, and it remains one to this day.

It was in this way that the death knell for the age of modernism was sounded in the 1970s. While it was not completely forced into extinction, it was no longer practical. The old notions which had supported art since the Renaissance could not withstand such intense scrutiny, and the foundation collapsed. Those who had been part of the modern movement were able to sustain themselves, but the budding artists of the 70s, and postmodernists ever since, have had to find new avenues and ask new questions

with their work. Does art have to be permanent? Must it be confined to the sterile blankness of a gallery? But scariest of all was one question in particular: What constitutes “art”? We *had* a consensus definition once upon a time, but over a period of hundreds of years that definition had eroded so much that it no longer had *any* visible parameters. Art could be a plywood box (according to Donald Judd), a pile of bricks (according to Carl Andre), shooting yourself in the arm (according to Chris Burden), or, famously, a dead shark preserved in formaldehyde (according to Damien Hirst). It is a particularly daunting question, one that has vexed so many since the collapse of modernism, and I will not pretend that my answer to the question is anymore correct than anyone else’s. Personally, I suspect that the question “What is art?” is a trick question, with no answer—or, perhaps, closer in nature to a Zen koan, like the sound of one hand clapping. I do feel compelled, however, to offer my views on the artistic practice with my contemporaries as a foundation upon which to build, or at the very least an icebreaker to start the important dialogue of self-invention.

At the moment, what defines my generation, what makes us unique from our predecessors, our grandparents, our parents, and our Gen X siblings, if I may borrow a pop culture terminology with which everyone will be familiar, is our absolute immersion in “the matrix”. Those of us born in the late 70s, 80s, and early 90s are the first generation of natural-born computer users. We have been computerites since kindergarten, and as such we have no real sense of a non-technological world. Our collective knowledge is the internet, our communication apparatus is the cell phone, and for those of us who are visual artists, the easel and canvas have been virtually abandoned for the laptop, Wacom tablet, and Adobe Photoshop. Where the debate was once oil vs. acrylic, you’re more likely to hear us debate raster vs. vector.

We know from fossil records recovered from the Old World (mostly Africa) that modern human beings are the descendents of a long line of now-extinct hominids dating back roughly four million years. There was *Homo habilis*, the “skillful man”, who used found tools for scavenging. *Homo habilis* begat *Homo ergaster*, the “working man”, who used *contrived* tools such as handaxes. *Homo ergaster* begat *Homo erectus*, the “upright man”, who used advanced tools for hunting. And *Homo erectus* begat *Homo sapiens*, the “wise man”. Anthropologists have for years looked at evidence of our evolutionary ancestors and theorized about who or what, as a race, we would be next. I don’t believe we need to look to the future for the answer to that question. It is in front of us here and now, in the present. Now, I am not a scientist, so I cannot claim this authoritatively to be biological fact; rather, it is my philosophical interpretation of our current society. We have become so dependent on our technology—our cars, buses, trains, televisions, cell phones, PDAs, blackberries, iPods, and computers—that we no longer behave like *Homo sapiens* of the past, and we no longer have all the same skill sets. Admittedly, certain aspects of the human experience are for now unaltered, and I’m not sure how much, if at all, we have changed in our basic anatomy (although, the conception of our modern technology has given us some very clear changes in the form of pacemakers, advanced artificial limbs, and a medically-aided new longevity). But this amazing surge in technological dependence, coinciding with the development of increasingly sophisticated computers and an unprecedented level of accessibility to knowledge and media, has drastically changed our *consciousness*. I believe it has changed the textbook definition of “human”, and as a result, the world as it relates to us, including the role of art, has changed as well. For the sake of this discussion, we are no longer *Homo sapiens*; we are *Homo machinos*, the “machine man”, and we demand art that appeals to us.

From my experience with my friends and artistic colleagues in both the United States and Canada, and from interacting with others in places like the United Kingdom,

the Netherlands, Hungary, Poland, Chile, and Singapore, I have observed three seminal universal peculiarities in regards to our generation's approach to art. First of all, I have noticed our indecision as we find ourselves torn between traditional media, such as paint, graphite, and charcoal, and digital media. Individually, it is simply a matter of taste. Each of us has a specific set of preferences. Taken as a generational whole, however, there seems to be a great deal of conflict. My personal feeling on the matter is that, until the day comes (and it may, sooner than any of us expect) that human beings assimilate into a Borg-like singularity that is more machine than flesh and bone, the traditional media will *never*, despite the naysayers and champions of the digital movement, completely die off. It has been said countless times before throughout the course of modernism, that "painting is dead", only to ultimately be disproved. The truth is that human beings crave the tactility, the experience of physical creation, the direct contact with paint or charcoal or clay or metal. We crave the process by which the medium serves as the divine conduit between our soul, our hands, and our inner being, and the world around us. We have been painting with our hands since cavemen adorned the walls of Lascaux with images of cattle. It is hardwired into us. This is why traditional media is my preference.

However, we now have a new tool in our arsenal, one with great potential. For as much as it has been lauded and possibly abused, the computer does present us with a whole new range of possibilities. It does not readily lend itself to the level of tactile interaction of, say, a painting or drawing, but digital media are entirely capable of producing work of a quality that matches or surpasses traditional media. The artists of this generation have all the tools they need to produce paintings, drawings, sculptures, and photographs digitally in cyberspace, and we shall soon, if it is not possible already, have the technology to translate all digitally created work from cyberspace to realspace. I believe it is impossible, or at the very least foolish, for any artist of this generation to ignore this new tool. I say this as a specimen of *Homo machinos* myself. If we have really evolved into this new breed of cyberians, then it makes all the sense in the world that traditional art would no longer wholly attract us as it once did. I believe there is something in digital art that reflects our essence, as the paintings of the Old Masters, Impressionists, and 20th Century artists once did. Gradually, we have become a society of ghosts-in-machines, and now, we require art that appeals to and touches both aspects—ghost *and* machine. For that reason, I recommend an integration of traditional and digital techniques. This has already long been achieved in the field of popular music, and artists from virtually every place on the popular musical spectrum, from Pink Floyd to Justin Timberlake, from Moby to Linkin Park, from Nine Inch Nails to Kanye West, have *all* experimented with blending traditional techniques and computer-generated music. Traditional purists may not like it, but I see it as a natural step forward for the visual arts as well.

The second attribute of our approach to art which I have observed is a vastly heightened sensitivity to the influence of popular consumer culture. Warhol and others of his ilk may be responsible for introducing Campbell's soup cans and Brillo soapboxes to the world of art, but I believe it has been *this* generation, more than any other before us, that has really drawn from the well of media. We have grown up constantly bombarded by visual images—TV, movies, video games, and, with the development of MTV in 1981, even music. The internet has compounded that bombardment, allowing us to instantly access virtually any type of video imaginable on YouTube. Young artists today are far more likely to be influenced by work they encounter as a result of the casual consumption of some other form of media. It is how I personally discovered H.R. Giger (from his work on *Alien* and the appearance of his sculptural microphone stand in Korn music videos), Alex Grey (from his contributions in both the album art and music videos

for the band Tool), Yoshitaka Amano (from his design work on the Final Fantasy series), Storm Thorgerson (from his incredible body of album art which includes work for Pink Floyd, Muse, the Mars Volta, and Audioslave) and Jeff Jordan (from his paintings used as album cover designs by the Mars Volta). Stylistically, I see so many other artists now emulating Giger, or Jhonen Vasquez, or Tim Burton, or Disney movies, or Nintendo characters, pulling elements from their work. Ours is a subculture of incessant stimulation, interactivity and memetics.

Such a consciousness is a double-edged sword in the field of art. On the one hand, we have a vast, almost limitless pool of cultural imagery from which to draw. Our muses are plentiful, and they are readily recognizable, especially to us. On the other hand, though, it is very easy for an artist in these conditions to become lazy and to produce trite, clichéd work. Without innovation, the act of going through the motions to produce artwork eventually becomes hollow and meaningless. Therefore, I believe it is of absolute import to my fellow artists to be cautious about how heavily they draw on these influences, lest they gain the ability to speak in another artist's vocabulary only to lose entirely their ability to speak in their own.

But in my mind, the most interesting and unexpected result of our evolution into *Homo machinos* is our new-found sense of globalism. We, the human race, have come closer than ever before to achieving singular consciousness, the free interchange of ideas between cultures that, at a point not too long ago, would never have been able to interact to such an extent. While we still cling to nation and religion, we have practically erased all borders and bridged all gaps. Not only are websites like YouTube and deviantArt places to consume media, they are bastions of Warhol's populism. They may be flawed, and much of the material submitted may have questionable validity within the once-rigid boundaries of the institution named "art", but the point is that it *is* possible now, as Warhol prophesized, for anyone to achieve recognition around the world for his or her creative expression. Artists now have, by luck of birth into our society at this particular point in history, the privilege of a level of exposure that until very recently was simply unheard of. The problem I see with our generation is that we take that privilege for granted, and fail to truly appreciate how revolutionary this technological advance really is for artists.

Through globalism, we have expanded ourselves and our view of the world, seeing in the perspectives of others and reaching out to embrace other cultures. We also possess an acute understanding of the issues that face all of us—war, hunger, poverty, discrimination, human rights, the environment, our dependence on technology—and our potential to make significant headway on each is astounding. We, the artists of this generation, have an obligation to acknowledge these things. We are coming of age in a wide wired world, and we have very pressing concerns in front of all of us; life in a vacuum is no longer an option.

In western society today, though, I can think of no better example of Generation Y's interest in foreign cultures than our affinity with the culture of Japan. Kindled primarily by the dual ascension of video games and the otaku subculture in the 1980s and 1990s, during our formative years, our fetishism of Japanese culture has since extended back into a genuine interest in more traditional forms of Japanese art. It is an interest not unlike the European Japonism movement of the 19th Century, after the United States forced Japan to open itself to dialogue with the West in 1853; the movement back then introduced Europeans to ukiyo-e prints, and influenced the work of Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, Monet and Van Gogh. Among a large portion of my generation, however, the area of the most intense focus is still in the domain of the otaku—manga and anime. It has become such a powerful force that it, too, has entered the lexicon of pop art; this is demonstrated by the Japanese postmodernist movement

known as Superflat, of which Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara are key figures. Of course, when Murakami and Nara create works imbued with otaku imagery, the result is absolutely Warholian, in a 21st Century Japanese way; that is, they are commenting on how their pop culture reflects their entire cultural identity in the same way Warhol commented on America's preoccupation with the cult of celebrity and the cult of consumerism. For anyone else outside of Japanese culture, however, the creation of otaku work seems disingenuous. Yet, for some reason, so many of us feel compelled to emulate it—we feel strangely attracted to it—we feel as if the culture is, at least in part, our own as well. Perhaps, by the simple act of consuming it so voraciously, it *has* become ours too. The question is, why *do* we consume it so voraciously in the first place?

The answer, or so I believe, is that, in this climate of immediate connection between cultures, we have seen beyond the limits of distance that once restricted our forebearers, and have grown ravenous for new mythologies and customs to replace the ones to which, as natives of the West, we have been exposed ad nauseum. Japan is a natural place to look; because of its long self-imposed isolation, it has developed its own rich history and culture, several times older than the United States has even existed, and yet, throughout the postwar 20th Century, it was also forced into adopting certain American conventions. Osamu Tezuka, who is often credited as being the creator of the anime archetype, openly admitted to his work being heavily influenced by Walt Disney, so in a sense the otaku culture is something of a bastard child of Japan and America. This means it is simultaneously exotic and accessible to us. And otaku culture is capable of satisfying virtually any impulse—sex, violence, the desire to escape into fantasy. Anime and manga are so diverse that they cover nearly all of the American cinematic spectrum, including comedy, drama, horror, mystery, action, adventure, science fiction, fantasy, musical, political fiction, and pornography. It can be for children or adults, highbrow or lowbrow. It can deliver powerful statements about the world we live in, or it can just entertain. It can even oscillate between gratuitous pop art and more traditional forms.

American Millennials (the generation born between the beginning of the 1980s and the mid-1990s), and by extension Millennials in the rest of the Western world, seem to have largely (though, admittedly, not entirely) developed a deep connection with otaku subculture, in addition to our own subcultures. The reason for this, I think, is because we see in Japanese society the opportunity to observe *ourselves*. In the wake of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, throughout the period of American occupation all the way up to the present, Japan has ceased to be Japan and has transformed into a Westernized version of “Japan”. The country was reinvented as a consumerist society based on American archetypes, and reshaped through the imposition of a Western-based code of values and morals. Otaku culture is the epitome of that imposition. In a way, we are attracted to it—the “kawaii” appeal, the kitsch factor, the unabashed profiteering from related merchandise—because these are things that represent the ways *our* values have, for better or worse, left ineradicable marks on a foreign culture. To use a perverse analogy, our fascination with otaku culture is along the same lines as mounting a mirror on the ceiling to watch oneself in the process of sexual intercourse.

This is, however, only one of the reasons, and the most superficial, why otaku culture matters to us. After speaking with many of my contemporaries, I feel confident in asserting that the real crux of the addiction, at least for many people, is narrative. Despite all the influence American culture has had across the Pacific, Japan is still uniquely in touch with the human desire to tell new stories. We in the West still tell stories, but so often now our traditional modern guardians of storytelling—our filmmakers in Hollywood—are so preoccupied with the business of film that stories are recycled over

and over again, and contain all the flavor of a piece of chewing gum that has been in the process of mastication for eight hours. Consider this a call to arms, then: for all of the Western artists of this generation, it falls upon us now. If Hollywood can no longer tell interesting stories and serve as the messengers of truth and wisdom, then we must do it. This demand, at least, has not been lost in the transition between *Homo sapiens* and *Homo machinos*. And while I think otaku culture serves as a brilliant model of what we in the West need to reclaim, I don't believe we can afford to be entirely consumed by our desire to emulate it. We Westerners, especially Americans, are facing a cultural crisis. Our society has stumbled into an anti-intellectual death spiral within the span of the postmodern movement, and with the decline of other academics, the relevance of art in our society has also been called into question. If we as a society are to continue to progress, and we as individual artists are to continue pursuing our passion, we *must* respond, emphatically, that we do indeed still matter—and we must do it in our own voices.

With these observations in mind—our ability to create digital artwork, our place in a world where computers erase borders, and our constant bombardment with various forms of entertainment media—we must examine in more depth the dark side of the evolution of *Homo machinos*. It is true that it is important, as Millennial artists, and as *Homo machinos* artists, to understand the structure of the society in which we live if we are to maintain our ability to create socially relevant artwork. Unfortunately, the values of the system are inherently at odds with those of artists (although, it is worth stating that this does not necessarily mean total incompatibility). Quite simply, we live in the great capitalist construct. By that, I mean this: most Western and Westernized societies do not value art highly enough to take care of us on the cultural merits of our contributions. We value business. Money is our god. When art is produced for art's sake, it is largely ignored; when it is produced as a consumer product, people take notice. As our technology advances, we only focus more and more on how we can make money faster and faster, and how we can assimilate everyone and everything under the sun into this construct.

The problem we face here, not only as artists, but generically as people within a society, is that it is in this system's nature and best interests to completely reduce the human element, including our ability to question the system. Machinery is predictable, efficient and expendable; human beings are not. For that very reason, a society as driven by commerce as ours naturally seeks to minimize our individuality—not out of malice, but out of instinctive quest for perfect efficiency. Throughout our history as a species, art has *always* been an act of identity as human beings: we paint and draw what we see, both real and imagined, and thus serve as magic mirrors of the human condition; we extract from within us formless ideas and experiences and, in a highly symbolic and cathartic process, we give them form; we take potshots at time and the surface of the Earth, hoping to make a scar deep enough to be remembered by others long after we are dust. But this is highly dependent on our ability to maintain our individuality; to quote Oscar Wilde, "Art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known." Our challenge, then, is to balance the needs of *Homo machinos* with the preservation of our humanity. If we are to succeed as "machine man", we must acknowledge the machine without completely discarding the man. Otherwise, my fellow artists, if we lose our independence, if we lose our distinct voices, I fear art itself *may* be rendered wholly meaningless.

From a pragmatic standpoint, though, it is important to know how to exist within the system, if we are to be able to change it (or at the very least protect ourselves). As noted already, Western society (the hyper-capitalistic American society in particular) values businessmen and entrepreneurs highly; people in more culturally significant roles,

such as artists, scholars, and teachers, are not as valued unless they actively participate in the process of commerce. There are, therefore, three options for artists to function in this system. The first is to assimilate into the workforce, creating artwork for enterprises, such as entertainment, advertisement, and product design, that may require it. This may or may not be permanent; this refers to artists employed by Disney, as well as freelance artists who accept commissioned work, such as H.R. Giger designing the xenomorph in *Alien* and its second sequel. The issue here is that so many artists are pooled in this process that, unless you are both extremely lucky and extremely talented, like Giger was, you run the risk of your contribution (and your individual voice) being entirely drowned out. The second option is to *become* the corporate entity via art entrepreneurialism. This is a tried and tested model, with Warhol, Keith Haring, Takashi Murakami, and Thomas Kinkade all tapping into the market by transforming their names into brands and blurring the lines between art and merchandise. At the very least, people who go this route maintain their individuality, although it can sometimes come at the very high cost of their artistic integrity. And of course, the third option is to fight against the stream, to rage against the machine, to be recognized within a small marginalized niche audience, and to find other ways of making a living. None of the three are really the most desirable of choices, because with each there are pitfalls. Ultimately, I suppose the true mark of the artist's retention of individuality is that it comes down to a personal choice for each artist, to decide which course falls closest to his or her own priorities.

We live in a world that sees us either as commercial commodities or as threats to the status quo, in an age where machines have obscured what it means to be "human" and to be an "artist". Our audience is a crowd with the single-minded purpose of feeding an insatiable appetite for effortless excitement and mindless captivation. We have been saddled with global issues of epic proportions, with which it is our responsibility to serve as concerned activists. On top of all of this, we, the art community, face the prospect of an anti-climactic implosion, lest we allow the influences of Warholian populism, pop culture, and anti-intellectualism to entirely strip us of our place in society. This is no less than a fight for survival—a struggle to maintain our place as the keepers of truth, wisdom, and the spirit of innovation, and to ensure our positions fulfilling these roles for future generations of *Homo machinos*.

People, we've got our work cut out for us.