



# Humanism and Digital Culture

# Preamble

These are confusing times. Our culture is undergoing great upheaval. Digital information is replacing almost every form of communication or recording of information we have known for the last millennium.

# Digital Culture

The state of culture for the artist at this moment in time is devastating.

Part of the reason for this state of affairs is due to the country I am writing from: the United States of America.

Compared to the many of the states in the European Union, America is gigantic, 3.806 million square miles. France has 211,209 square miles, Spain has 194,897 square miles and the United Kingdom only 94,525 square miles. Russia, of course, has more territory than the US, at 6.602 million square miles and China has slightly less than the US at 3.705 million square miles.

What separates the US from all these other states is that it is highly organized with vast economic resources and an aggressive (some say paranoid) cultural outlook. What happens here does not stay here. Technology is used to spread the cultural word.

Because the US has a large territory, organization developed to control it and govern it. The organization is fueled by capitalism. Because capitalists are always looking for new markets, they also fueled our aggressive cultural outlook.

The traditional fine arts in the United States are largely inherited from Europe. Jazz, blues, rock 'n roll and musical theater originated here, but all have a European base that is difficult to ignore in spite of other documented roots.

The problems facing the arts in the US are aggravated by the Puritan ethic, which says that art must pay for itself. Since art cannot pay for itself by relying on a single community support, because there are not enough paying customers, usually, in the local public, the best answer to generating support is to broadcast it because of our large territory. The motion picture business was the first to solve this problem, followed by television. Purely European-based art forms are now entering the arena. Opera does satellite broadcasts to large movie theaters.

Art museums, beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in America remain fixed in locale. They also remain fixed in a 19<sup>th</sup> century outlook. Painting, sculpture and other forms do participate in the capitalist enterprise through the great art auction houses, Sotheby's and Christie's but both are firmly located in New York. One participates remotely in their auctions by phone or online in much the same way you can buy stocks.

In fact, art auctions have become a form of investing. Art circulates like money. Pushing the metaphor, it often seems that art *is* money.

An artist's reputation is formed not by critics but in the art market. The reason for this is that the cultural value of an object is very subjective, and will vary from one person to the next. When a number is put on an art object, that's a quantity. It is not subjective. If a collector is willing to pay 75 million for a painting, that price puts a number on the painting. If the painting subsequently goes to auction again, the dollar amount paid this time will

always refer back to the former value of 75 million. If the new price is set at 95 million, the artist's reputation goes up. If it is only 50 million, the artist's reputation goes down.

What has happened here in the desire to quantify an art object is that the cultural value of the work is divorced from the monetary value because the cultural value cannot be quantified. Cultural value therefore falls into the value-added category of an art object.

Art lies somewhere between the categories of currency and commodity. People trade art back and forth, just like currency. Give me that sculpture and I'll give you this painting because they are equal in value. Art is also a good, like grain or gasoline, so when it is bought, you actually have something. Commodification.

Another added-value that is not quantified is the worth of the artist. That is to say, how the artist himself or herself is valued by the culture. Additionally, not all works by the same artist are rated equally. Sometimes, even the greatest artists have bad days. The value of the artist is another subjective rating that is not given a number exactly, but somehow figures into the price of an art object.

The worth of an artist culturally, and the cultural value of the object created are all extremely important to artists. These elements are part of the legacy of humanism. To the individual artist these elements may be the reason they are doing art. They are motivators. They are also firmly located in the sphere of humanism, which says that the human being is the highest form of matter. All economic systems, thoughts systems and views of government should therefore serve human interests.

Humanism is frequently seen as being in conflict with determinism, particularly mathematical determinism which posits that outcomes are known in any specific set of circumstances. The computer, as we know it is a product of mathematical determinism.

When these aforementioned artists begin to consider the digital they are thrown into a quandary because the use of a machine to make art seems to be in violent conflict with the reasons they are artists in the first place. Is it really a case of the determinism of the machine vs. the legacies of humanism?

Yes, it is.

I think that artists who want the best future will find ways to accommodate both the humanistic and the digital views of art. They will most likely find ways to use the tension between these views to fuel new works that will take their viewers to places that cannot be imagined now.

I won't speculate on what the future will bring in art and technology developments because I don't know. But I will mention virtual reality as a technology that is already here that will open new vistas for artists as well as viewers. Others, that have not been explored much include using viruses as mediums to carry art.

This idea originated with Hans Moravec, Adjunct Professor of Robotics at Carnegie Mellon University. I read about this and in 1991 I wrote a little program called **Marcel Duchamp, A Trojan Horse, Even**. The idea behind this work was to induce others to have fun. It worked this way:

You opened the program, and it began to fill your screen with icons of Duchamp's various works. Theoretically, it didn't stop until it overloaded your computer with icons and everything ground to a halt.

In reality, I limited its cycle to 36 new icons.

I entered this work in a Macworld software contest in the "Anything Goes" category. I got a call from Macworld asking what the program did, and I told them it made icons based on Duchamp's works. About 15 minutes later, I got another call. The terrified voice on the other end of the line asked: **How do you turn it off???**

I told them it would stop after 36 iterations. And it did.

I was mentioned when Macworld announced the winners, but I didn't win.

My word to the bold innovators and makers of tomorrow's techno-art is when you punch people's buttons, don't expect rewards but enjoy making your work. You'll be setting the standard for the art of tomorrow.