



Do You Ever Dream of the Animals at Lascaux?

Ian Maleney

Often I find myself asking some variation on a single fundamental question: is it possible to articulate a position – aesthetic, philosophical, ethical position – which rejects the systematic atomisation, globalisation, and dehumanisation one finds in endless evidence across the tech-and-finance-driven societies of the world, without falling into the dead-end trap of nostalgia, romanticised folk culture, and mystical authenticity? What would such a position look like in practice, and how could it be sustained against so many and such disparate pressures? How can that rejection of the contemporary avoid being a reversion to an already discredited or largely fantastical past? What role can art play in this?

For my experience of art now is largely a numb one – the greater the work's involvement with the industry that surrounds and feeds on it, the more numbing it is; the more specific meaning it conveys. I do not want to be educated or entertained by art. I don't seek it out so I can feel better about myself, my taste, and my refined sensibility. Nostalgia is poison. I am looking, always, for a profound experience, a flash of recognition, a light in the dark, which reveals a beauty, a truth, exceeds my grasp. I am looking for that deep shock which is the instinctive perception of the other – their immediate presence, their skill and grace, their vision and interpretation of the world. And, within that, a connection, it can arrive in an instant or unfold over a long time, but the feeling of nearness, of intimacy, is what I'm searching for, it's a kind of timesess (or rather *time-ful*) experience, illogical, unbound, asynchronous; a conversation in which everything is given and received freely, without debt or credit, as an offering. For nothing, as it were.

Anything at all as seriously as that? What does it say about us and the methods and the goals? What would it take for us to take seriously? To not laugh, to not cynically reject and dismiss ignore. Shaw's position by the end of the film is not so secure; looking for solace and redemption in the most clichéd places – but there is some truth in it which becomes impossible to ignore. The desperate falling of a rich and unstarved man may strike us at first as little ridiculous, faintly embarrassing as the only viable vector for this imperialistic rejection. His store of his efforts, the social, political, realistic aspects of them – professionalised world of industry, and to recognise the nature of his efforts, a light in the dark, which reveals a beauty, a truth, I had not previously understood and which, even in revelation, I am looking, always, for a profound experience, a flash of recognition, a light in the dark, which reveals a beauty, a truth, myself, my taste, and my refined sensibility. Nostalgia is poison. I am looking, always, for a profound experience, a flash of recognition, a light in the dark, which reveals a beauty, a truth, exceeds my grasp. I am looking for that deep shock which is the instinctive perception of the other – their immediate presence, their skill and grace, their vision and interpretation of the world. And, within that, a connection, it can arrive in an instant or unfold over a long time, but the feeling of nearness, of intimacy, is what I'm searching for, it's a kind of timesess (or rather *time-ful*) experience, illogical, unbound, asynchronous; a conversation in which everything is given and received freely, without debt or credit, as an offering. For nothing, as it were.



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Sometimes they come to me, out of the dark as they come to us all. In the warm flicker of firelight, the figures – drawn so directly, with such purpose – seem to move as the shadows move. Hidden beneath the burning surface of the earth, they are secretive, safe, almost eternal. In my mind I see the cattle, the oxen, the aurochs. I see a gigantic ochre flank hanging off a bony black frame; the spine leading in one clear movement to the skull and the horns. This is not just an animal, but in this place become the animal – all that we, whose long-past ghosts stood there and painted with their hands, are not; all that is outside of us, free of our double-edged awareness; free on the dark stone wall, as never in the flesh, of the certainty of death.

The mystery of these animals has not changed for the longest time. Perhaps it has never changed – perhaps to have stumbled upon them a day after their



creation would have caused the same deep resonant shock they cause me even now. The air is suddenly the same as one finds upon entering certain religious buildings – the mind turns instantly to thoughts of some eternal presence, some transient way we have of seeing and experiencing beauty, both in its creation and its unknowable afterlife. The ochre flank rises up like a cathedral wall. I think my most secular thoughts: someone saw this in their mind, and brought it about. It was done by someone, for someone, possibly for some purpose which now, through both time's passing and the work's own immediate beauty, it has long since eclipsed. And just as the artist's discovery of these forms unfolded over some time – a process in which nothing is ever certain, in which any misstep may sever the tender, miraculous connection to something other – so our own rediscovery flowers in time, blooming with all the time that has passed between the original hand and ours. And as we see the bulls, the oxen, the aurochs, we feel the beauty and the power, but we see, too, the hands that rendered that beauty and power on the wall. We hear

an echo almost lost within ourselves, a connection to the ancestors and their animal world – the otherness which, we cannot help but feel, they knew and felt in a manner we have since left behind. Some wonder has dissipated, some dream of the animal, the earthen, has vanished.

When the animals come to me, this is what I feel: grief, for the ancestors and what they learned that we have since forgotten; and desire – desire to feel the warmth of the fire against tired skin, to feel all the endless night beyond it, to touch skin to stone and leave a vision in the dark for others to follow: the flank and the frame, the first evidence we have of being haunted by the animal, by what is natural and unthinking and unquestionably not us. The grief is all the pain of living knowing we will die.

The desire is what burns through it, what drives into the dark, towards what haunts and shocks and, we hope, what heals. Maybe the primary lesson of Lascaux is that art never progresses in any meaningful sense. It changes all the time in style, in aim, in value, but its quality can not exactly be said to increase or decrease. There is simply no qualitative measurement we could plot on a graph to show, see, art is getting better, objectively. The novelist of today has no upper hand on Cervantes or Shakespeare, the composer no special insight unavailable to Bach. The tools may change but, humans being human, we learn the truths of life (which, I hope, is what we put into art) not as a set of facts but as a series of revelations for which we may or may not be prepared, to

which we may or may not be open. And because the work of art itself is similarly revelatory, miraculous even, it cannot be engineered, or even really anticipated; being ready and willing is no guarantee it will come. I suspect this is an uncomfortable truth for contemporary society, which bases its entire structuring mythology on the idea that hard work pays off, that you can chip away at any problem in a concerted fashion and receive a solution



in return, that risk and investment and the ingenuity of the individual are the driving forces of social and technological progress. We are living in an insanely rational world, where the logistics of day-to-day existence are immeasurably complex and unbending; a world which sees everything within it as a commodity, and treats everything and everyone as a widget in some unknowably large production line. Everything is a case of supply and demand, and the only thing that matters, in the end, is the margin.

It is hard to imagine an environment less hospitable for the from the solo YouTube to the largest Hollywood conglomerate. My friend, a poet, tells me she wants to write a book that is read once, aloud, and then burned. A book that would escape the fate ordained for it – to be forever lying around, ready to be picked up, to be sold or unsold; to be always being forgotten. A single copy, read once and destroyed – the idea fires the imagination. There is something pagan about it, something sacrificial, awesome, dangerous. The publisher responds, sounding concerned: but then all that work would be for nothing? We savour the phrase: for nothing. Yes, for nothing – for no monetary gain, for no asset accumulation; no career advancement, no social capital. All that work, burning in the flames, dissolving in the minds of whoever witnessed its singular, brief existence. Yes, for nothing – there is no higher cause.

The system only knows me so well: my YouTube recommendations are full of beautiful young women and men with terrific beards buying cabins in the woods and starting farms on remote mountainsides. These homesteaders are but one highly visible aspect of a self-conscious movement that uses the means of digital sharing – primarily the social networks and propagation of a lifestyle which is all about the suppression of the digital, the relegation of the inauthentic and technological beneath the gloriously authentic natural world and natural life. Variations on this theme are everywhere, from meditation apps funded by venture capital to whatever high-end wo-woom Gymlife is happening today; from two Etsy operations to charismatic selling on Instagram and social media. I have a much greater sense of agency; where I can have what is in my food, where my relationships with the human and non-human worlds are immediate and reciprocal. I can begin to imagine what I absolutely do not have right now: an unalienated life.

But I overdoze quickly on this grand of new age guff. I can see too clearly the seams and stresses hidden within the all-is-well presentation. The dishonesty, the desperation, the co-dependency between the lifestyle and that which it notionally rejects – it scours the whole endeavour. It seems too much about, only what draws the exhausted eye. The networks of transmission are flooded, the connections between people – and between people and places, pasts, traditions, rituals – are usurped. The ideal viewer for contemporary work, no matter the form, is an exhausted individual, alone in their room, connected only to the flows of online information which legitimise and extend the deluge of content, desperately searching for something to suspend the mind for a precious few hours before they have to go back to work. This is the historical, antisocial wasteland of the culture industry today.

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This piece was commissioned by Cork County Council Arts Office in conjunction with Imbolic Gate (Irish) Creative Break, a public art project by Marie Brett. Marie Brett's film, *Dragon's Tail* will be screened in Cork on Culture Night 2022. Half of the images used in this piece were generated by Stable Diffusion, a prompt-based AI image generation software.



If the world, including works of art, can be broken down into elemental components, quickly commoditised and endlessly reassembled, then the work of art, like social life itself, is easily reconstructed from first principles, easily tweaked for better results and better profits, easily reproduced and reinvented for new markets. And much of the most successful art today, financially speaking, succeeds because of its fidelity to that world view: it has a clear message, fitting with the 'issues' and 'concerns' of the moment, and a clear purpose – education, through which the audience feels better about itself for being told something it already knows about this or that (justice, this or that oppression, or entertainment, in which a hero or a recognisable face journeys toward some meaningless goal and the audience is expected only to feel gratitude that they haven't had to think for an extended period of time. Of course the success of this work is easily measured: box office returns, subscriber numbers, and bestseller lists are trivially plotted on a graph. And when numbers go up, everyone feels good.

The form of this work, which is so repetitious, so schematised, so heavily and intentionally stereotypical, reflects the globalised industry which gives rise to it, and it reflects the ever more rapid-paced and unreflective media environment that depends on it for content. The 'themes' of the work must be simple and clearly stated; the visual language (and the actual language) must be instantly recognizable and easily understood. The gimmick, the set-up, the conceit must be obvious – if it can't be summed up in one line, it's no good.

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