

## Beyond Face

Claire Pentecost

In Jack London's story, *The Lost Face*, two wanderers find themselves in hostile territory, on the brink of starvation. They are captured by a prosperous, belligerent people who shelter them briefly until deciding the beggars would be put to best use feeding the local hunger for spectacle. The hero of our story—I can't remember his name, so let's just call him Damien—watches his companion undergo gruesome torture for the clan's entertainment and solidarity until the poor man is mercilessly exterminated and the crowd turns to him. "Wait! I know a secret potion that protects a man from death. If you give me time to prepare it, my own execution will serve to show that it works!"

Like wealthy headmen everywhere, the chief had everything he could possibly want; the only thing he feared was death. He loved the idea and for weeks, Damien demanded various ingredients and conditions. An elite circle of most loyal insiders studied his arcane procedures to learn and possess the secret. Damien enjoyed their luxury entertaining them with novelties and tales, while they provided him whatever resources he ordered to create the fabulous elixir, including a workshop, servants, the ministrations of women, and sweet time to let the ingredients age properly. The chief grew moody and at last exploded with impatience and suspicion. "Good news!" replied Damien, "everything is ready! Let's prepare a feast for the great occasion. Tomorrow after just one swallow of this brew, I will bare my neck for you and when you bring the ax down with all your might the whole crowd will see it spring back from the force of life within me."

The chief spared nothing for the next day's show of his glory. At the height of the festivity, Damien sipped from the great vat of magic and knelt to lay his head on the block before the chief. The ax came down before the hushed crowd and Damien's head rolled before them, severed in an instant.

1.

One way or another all artists are socially engaged. However individual artists choose to acknowledge their engagement, artists generally expect and are at least nominally accorded more than the common share of autonomy. Autonomy is always conditional, always a negotiation. A persistent feature of artistic practice is that it resonates primarily in the realm of the symbolic. Often the presumed autonomy of the artist is symbolic, or imaginary.

This is not to say *merely* symbolic. Or *merely* imaginary. The symbolic has force, and it is as powerful as ever. We live in the age of semiotic capital. Information drives the economy. Innovation in financial instruments creates money from debt. Computer modeling earns a killing for hedge fund directors. Knowledge and the semiotic systems that convey it are understood as material value, not only to the knower but also to the owner, the buyer, the hoarder, the company with a good legal team. Those who create

enough money don't have to possess knowledge, they can own it. They can fund research at public universities and filter the findings to the mainstream press. The image they create of the knowledge they own is the basis for new money. Perception moves the stock market. Imagination moves armies and creates wealth.

Many activities of this kind are now loosely categorized as "creative industries" and they are. Creativity takes as many forms as we strive to give it. The terms of the artist's autonomy have been mystified for many generations. The artist's autonomy has been defined as autonomy from the world, from daily life, from solutions to real problems haunting the collective. This symbolizes a freedom to be beyond social engagement. Like the American farmer, the whistleblower, the person of conscience and other icons of individual freedom, the artist marches to a drumbeat that is valorized while marginalized.

2.

This essay has its origins in an effort to theorize a paradigm of the artist well under way in practice. Under this paradigm the artist serves as conduit between specialized knowledge fields and other members of the public sphere by assuming a role we call the Public Amateur.

As such, the artist becomes a person who consents to learn in public. This person takes the initiative to question something in the province of another discipline, acquire knowledge through unofficial means, and assume the authority to offer interpretations of that knowledge, especially in regard to decisions that affect our lives. The point is not to replace specialists, but to enhance specialized knowledge with considerations that specialties are not designed to accommodate.

Specialization has brought about marvelous achievements. But under increasing complexity and fragmentation, the need for overviews of how vectors of power-knowledge intersect has become more imperative than ever. Our culture asks too high a price of society when it insists on narrow professional specialization. Conforming to this demand divides our intellect from our emotions, our imagination from our efforts, our pleasure from our worth, our verbal and analytic capacity from other creative talents, and our ethics from our daily lives. The result is frustration and disempowerment for the individual and shortsightedness for society as a whole.

In putatively secular societies such as ours, appeals to notions of the scientific have justified authority for some time. It doesn't matter if these appeals make sense under scrutiny, only that they convey an effect of rationality. This permeates strategies on work, health, sexuality, family, economics, resource management, urbanization, leisure. Now that rational and scientific claims compete more than they unify, and divergent assertions of prescriptive knowledge can all cite *someone's* science, how should the lay public evaluate contradictory claims, supposedly based on a common system of verification? Authority itself is in fragments, and worse: it is corrupt.

Sensing, if not being told outright, that modernity has produced immeasurable threats, an increasingly confused and phobic public is accused of irrationality. Affected parties are often deemed incompetent in matters of their own vulnerability. They lose an essential part of their cognitive sovereignty.

3.

Do I believe Monsanto's scientifically based claim that pesticides and transgenic foods are safe to ingest, and controllable in the environment? Do I trust United States Department of Agriculture, Environmental Protection Agency and Food & Drug Administration systems of review and approval for new technologies? What goes on inside these proprietary brands and sanitary acronyms? Who works there? Where do they get the information they use to determine our future? Are there disagreements in the process? Who makes the final decision?

Questions like these generate metaknowledge, that is, knowledge about knowledge. It's a level of understanding that can provide a basis for evaluating the circumstances that produce expertise; sort out contradictory findings and claims; and incorporate that which scientific epistemology is designed to exclude: human desires, feelings, and values.

I need to know a lot more than what the authorities are telling me, i.e., I need to create knowledge about the knowledge in question. To do this I have more tools than ever before: libraries, the internet, films, news services, public interest groups, advertising, the freedom of information act, freedom of speech which protects my right not only to say what I want but also to hear and read what others say. And more and more, I have access to evidence that authoritative knowledge, speaking for us, serves itself first. The rest of us are collateral damage in the war of profit making.

It's not enough to have all this. I need to learn ways to use it. I need new forms of literacy to comprehend all that is available to me. I need to devise a criterion to organize the metalanguage.

4.

In the beating heart of daily life, people find signals in the noise; wittingly or not, they privilege one signal over another and make decisions based on belief, compromise and contradiction. Ultimately what each of us does to get through the day, and how reconciled we are to the options available to us, depends on what we care about. This aspect of survival proceeds in the realms we name ethics, aesthetics, philosophy and love. These are things that organize our being.

If I have no clear reference points in these realms, the metalanguage becomes its own circle of hell. I'm informed, terribly informed, festering with other brains in the vat. I show signs of info-dementia: isolation, frustration, nostalgia, blame, disorientation,

paranoia, paralysis. The third chakra, locus of initiative and purpose, becomes soft, as soggy as a sponge.

I observe that many people embrace authoritarianism in the vacuum of trustworthy authority. Religion and other forms of spirituality are natural antidotes. Seeing that the rational professions have failed us, they say, in so many words, “Enough with brains. Religion can at least reinforce what I care about, with all the affirmation of a distinct community, and a clear system for living.” For many, the third chakra, mapped on the body at the region of the navel, hypertrophies, relieving reason of all but the most trivial duties. My gut tells me this is the right thing to do. My gut tells me you are wrong. My gut sticks to my decisions, I am a decider. A firm decision leapfrogs years of contemplation.

5.

The artist finds herself alternately feted, ignored or scorned by the followers of the gut. Whichever befalls her, she lives like everyone at the mercy of erratic transmissions from the vat-bound brains.

Despite the professionalization of the artist, she does what she does because she loves to do it. The amateur moves from a similar impulse, hence the name. The amateur has transparent relations to her object. She approaches and ultimately appropriates the object of knowledge out of enthusiasm, curiosity or personal need. She learns outside the circuits of professional normalization and reward, things the artist was once presumed to resist.

Anyone can develop expertise and, if motivated enough, can even become an authority. The amateur can be as narrow as the specialist or as amorous as the polymath lover of knowledge. The category of the Public Amateur is not confined to artists. It’s a growing polyglot array of people who want to operate equally from the gut and the brain.

Theoretically, everyone now has tools to constitute some kind of audience; any amateur can choose to test ongoing learning in public. It’s more difficult for professionals to learn in public because they must protect their authority, which in most fields is not served by saying, “I don’t know” in a spotlight, or by openly performing a spastic struggle to understand something. People acutely aware of the failures of authority do this all the time.

Heartbroken parents of autistic children seek out experiments, theories and findings not favored by the medical establishment. The more public their efforts the more likely they are to find each other, compare their questions and experiences, exponentially further their learning. They are forming a new authority, a collective one based on the continuous trial, error, inquiry, and search conducted by a wide range of people. The credibility of this authority is tested by the members of the voluntary collective, people like themselves who have a lot to gain or loose. Their affiliation is based on positions, not identities.

Hackers and other open source contributors produce knowledge by synching their efforts outside the offices of corporations and universities. They have constituted an autonomous value system outside the values concretized in copyright and profit maximization. In the eighties and nineties people with AIDS educated themselves and hacked the health system to redesign the clinical trials and treatments that meant life or death to them. More recently, people sickened by lifestyles of convenience structure their own experiments in living sustainably. They publish their trials and errors on websites, in books and magazines, speak and listen in public to clarify problems, exchange solutions, and build purpose.

6.

To some extent art always inhabits the plane of metalanguage because of its relationship to the symbolic. When actions are called art, they resonate with heightened symbolic capacity. Art is subject to interpretation and value judgments, connecting us to the realms called ethics, aesthetics, philosophy and love. This is part of the purpose of calling something art.

Artists are expected to have publics, however small or large, but for better or worse, they are not expected to know much. An artist who wants to perform learning can leverage whatever claim to a public she is able to accrue, and initiate processes she hasn't mastered, putting the very notions of professionalization and credibility on the stage. This is an activation of metalanguage, something that artists do all the time. When I perform the acquisition of knowledge in the symbolic resonance that is art, I am inviting new conversations about knowledge itself. By placing this activity in the realm of aesthetics, I subject it to our questions about what we care about.

Let's have a conversation about this love affair we are having. Let's have a metaconversation. Metaknowledge comes about between people. It's conversational. The value and meaning of the art our culture has developed is purposefully debatable; it flourishes between people. When the artist publicly conducts research using new guidelines and criteria, she launches the project of research itself into conversational reevaluation.

7.

Artists are not expected to know much, but they are expected to feel and to sense. They are allowed to engage whatever range of the human sensorium is necessary to them. Even when some theories of modernism attempted to purify a given medium from all reference to more than one sensing capacity, the achievers of such a feat were presumed to channel their entire sensibilities into these media-true forms. In the hands of the artist, metalanguage exceeds the literally and exclusively linguistic. Proust convinced us to smell the asparagus in our urine.

The worlds conjured by artists have always been freighted with values. These normative investments have been located or dislocated in the broad shouldered, soft-featured, evasive figure of beauty. Recurrently critics and audiences attempt to simplify the problem of the criteria (and purpose) of art by narrowing it to the pursuit of beauty. But this simplifies nothing. Often assumed to be a universal, beauty, whether narrowed to an idea of visual pleasure or expanded to the essence of the good and the true, is as subject to debate as any other value.

Beauty is still invoked as though it solves the thorny issue of discerning the value of works of art. When people talk about a return to beauty, no matter what else they are saying, the message includes a wish to dissociate aesthetic evaluation from other questions of social value. None of the many transient forms of beauty can spare us the further work of evaluating how the values inherent in any concrete example of beauty fix different kinds of makers and audiences in different relations to power, in different relations to material and symbolic resources.

8.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century is a story of artists rebelling against beauty and its alienation from life, only to have their gestures put through a strainer to isolate an anorexic aesthetics: a revised beauty purged of heterogeneous notions of value. When the vitality of a given art movement is irresistible, the strainer refines what can be softened into the morphing shape of beauty, leaving the rest for the historians and social scientists.

In the 1980s and 90s, a generation of artists once again turned our backs on beauty which at the time was being celebrated as stridently irrational. Under that particular wave of anti-aesthetics, we made works informed by the hermeneutics of suspicion. A paranoid epistemology made sense, given the opportunism and corruption flaunted by authority. We believed that the critique of power could deliver us from the catastrophes unfolding around us. Then we found ourselves caught in a routine of unveiling truths about our enemy, as we watched an economic and political system validate whole new levels of violence.

At the end of Jack London's tale, the people see that their chief is either a greedy fool or himself a con man, probably both. He is forced into exile, or maybe executed, I don't remember. I'm interested in the question beyond the point where the chief loses face: what new forms will organize the people and their wealth?

Proliferating sharper tools of outrage is not insignificant, but focusing on the failure of authority to produce a more livable world has not in itself produced a more livable world. In compensation, critique offers a sense of mastery. Attached to our skills, we find ourselves nourishing a detached metaknowledge that becomes its own circle of hell. Here we catch ourselves preempting every glimmer of emergence. An exhausted metaknowledge demands reinvention and something more: if we want to remake our world we have to turn our sensors away from failure and nurture the clumsy initiatives

that offer new ways to be. The paranoid epistemology gives way to an epistemology guided by receptivity.

9.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century is also a story of artists crashing the division of labor that organizes different forms of intelligence into specializations. What history has named conceptual art is one example. Explicitly articulating an array of new criteria, these artists navigated a channel of aesthetics breaching the usual quarantine of human capacities: thinking-feeling, verbal-visual, critical-inventive, analytical-creative, activism-art. Perhaps most importantly these artists disturbed the division of artist from audience, soliciting new aesthetic invention on the part of those engaging their works.

I've been told that artists should just be artists, and activists should just be activists, because otherwise we get bad art and lame activism. Such prescriptions reinforce the preference for recognized forms of mastery while pre-empting emergence and ignoring the fact that art, activism and other living forms require continuous renewal.

The "other" is an accident which one sometimes wishes to avoid. The other is a hazard, the constant proximity of chance, because the other cannot be predicted or controlled. The intolerance of seemingly incommensurable systems is a form of defense against the other.

10.

"You see, it was the eclipse. It came into my mind in the nick of time, how Columbus, or Cortez, or one of those people, played an eclipse as a saving trump once, on some savages, and I saw my chance. I could play it myself, now, and it wouldn't be any plagiarism, either, because I should get it in nearly a thousand years ahead of those parties."

So speaks Hank Morgan, an invention of the American writer Mark Twain, a Yankee thrust from 1890's Connecticut into King Arthur's Court, 528 A.D. As an unexpected stranger from another time, he can hardly account for his oddity, and so evokes the usual homicidal suspicion. Awaiting his execution, this pragmatic man of industry calculates that there will be a solar eclipse the next day, and sends notice to the King that he is a magician more powerful than Merlin, and he will destroy the sun if he is not treated accordingly. Among the skills he brings from the future is hard-nosed business sense, and he negotiates not only his life but also appointment as "perpetual minister and executive" to the King. Armed now with worldly powers he proceeds to modernize the kingdom, introducing electricity, telephone, typewriter, schools, newspapers, advertising, soap, gunpowder and more. His great knowledge and his insistence on business earn Hank the moniker of "the Boss."

He does most of this covertly, so as not to arouse the hostile defenses of local institutions. But in the Boss's view, the biggest obstacle to delivering the people from poverty and fear and into industrialized, capitalist democracy is their own lack of readiness. What holds them back is their subservient acceptance of King and Church.

Complications inevitably ensue until the Boss and his band of loyal followers, despite electrified fencing and Gatling guns, find themselves trapped in a bunker, well defended but unable to conquer. Wounded by a knight, Boss Hank is finished off, and perhaps also saved, by sorcery: Merlin hexes him to sleep for the next 13 centuries. He will wake again in the stream of modernity.

11.

Culture may do little more than stall whatever makes people want to kill each other. And symbolic formulations are always enlisted on the way to the slaughter. Twain wrote his book partly to ridicule the influence of Sir Walter Scott, whose romantic concoctions of medieval chivalry he blamed for the Confederate War. Twain believed in the power of ideas. So much so that the first thing Hank Morgan does as a minister in King Arthur's court is set up a patent office: innovations and the folks who dream them deserve to prosper through commercial exploitation. One of the fondest ideas of Twain's age was the promise of education, technology and free enterprise to alleviate human misery.

Now, with over a hundred more years of future heaped on our heads, one of the most frightening ideas of our age is the current consensus that defective education, unregulated technology and prodigious enterprise are hurling us into a future where we will scramble for the humble survival skills of a distant past. Technology is still invoked as though it will solve the thorny issue of environmental risks, natural resources and the distribution of both. But it's never so simple. Subservient to authority systems mystified as rational, we the people lack the readiness to fulfill modernism as an egalitarian truce, or to move beyond it. But one thing is for sure: the Public Amateur is not aiming to wake up as the Boss, nor as his complicit jester.