

ALTERING ART'S GENE POOL

(Defying the Acceptable – Exposing oneself to Danger)

By Gary John Gresl

INTRODUCTION – THE ESSENTIAL COMPONENT

In the late 1980's I wrote three compositions which manifested one after the other as I gradually explored my art making and art thinking. *(These individual writings were originally illustrated to enhance their visual appeal, but here I unite the three papers into one ten page manuscript without those illustrations.)* I can say little more than this loosely links some ideas under the universal theme of Evolution. In the end, despite the abundant verbiage to follow, this personal unfolding of my thoughts will likely be simple and a very dry read.

All things evolve...the physical and the mental. Evolution is a natural outgrowth of matter and mind being affected by “the” surrounding “elements” which act upon them. The results manifest for a period of time, and then change again and again. Sometimes that which is changed maintains a history of its previous states within itself, in the physical structure, in the genes and building blocks, in “layers” of history.

The speed of change during the 20th and 21st century has been terrific. We witness numerous transformations now within a single lifetime, and the speed of change and required new perceptions would stun those not attuned to it. The rapidness of our thought processes, now assisted by computers and mechanical devices, permit alterations of ideas, if necessary, from moment to moment. This generation of ideas, largely considered a human characteristic, is really basically a product of an organism that has arisen upon this planet, and which still has strong natural ties to the environment.

How is thought, the creation of new ideas, and the generation of new forms of art, related to the evolution of the Universe in general? We and our arts are products of growth and change. Our art is subject to a natural selection process in much the same way that life forms achieve success or pass into oblivion.

What follows is not a finely honed thesis with secure conclusions. Rather, herein I've tucked some personally significant thoughts, and some subjects to be considered for greater exploration. This paper is a beginning on the road leading to other ideas. It is part of the evolutionary process that is at the heart of the paper itself. In fact, like Evolution, it really has no conclusion.

I. MUTATIONS, IDEAS & THE EVOLUTION OF ART

PHYSICAL MUTATIONS

Darwin's theories, long considered, elaborated upon, and refined for well over a century, are basic ideas

of growth and change in Nature. Essentially, living organisms upon Earth can change slowly from generation to generation, altering gradually in physical appearance and behavior. Darwin's theories were his speculations, derived from observation, which are still useful in our interpretation of the nature of change. His early thoughts about evolution were the groundwork for new developments, and are hardly complete or perfect in themselves.

“There is no immaculate perception; we do not see reality except through the spectacles of a theory. But not all spectacles allow coherent vision, not all theories, when applied to experience, can make sense of the strands of order that we intuitively believe interconnect the myriad phenomena we encounter around us. The best we can do is to prove the validity of our conceptual scheme by showing that, when we use it as a spectacle to view reality, reality appears coherent and meaningful.”

Ervin Laszlo, from *Evolution, The Grand Synthesis*, 1987, pg. 109

A basic assumption in evolution, proven by observation and experiment, is that differences sometimes occur in the physical make-up of organisms from generation to generation, and some of these changes can be passed on to offspring. Physical differences which “breed true” are called mutations. Mutations in organisms are often solutions to altering conditions within an environment, *in much the same way that new ideas are often solutions to altering social and cultural conditions.*

PARALLELS: LIFE & THOUGHT, ORGANISMS & ART

What I suggest is that there are distinct parallels between what we have come to perceive as a “Natural Order,” that which is motivated by Nature without human intervention, and the evolution of human societies, cultures, and the physical manifestation of ideas that we call art. Laszlo's book, *Evolution, The Grand Synthesis*, quoted above, discusses patterns and parallels of evolution in microcosm and macrocosm, in physical nature and human societies. While he does not specifically delve into the evolution of art, I believe that his theory of corollaries applies. Ideas made physical in art are tested within their environment, and just as in the worlds of inanimate and animate, succeed or fail and help form that which follows them.

New forms of life, physical or thoughtful, occur as a result of the response an organism makes to its environment. An intriguing and somewhat revolutionary idea concerning physical mutations in organisms is that the DNA of each individual has the reserve potential to physically augment as a result of the organism's stimulation by the environment. *“There may be sensors within the organism that reprograms the DNA to meet the needs of new stimuli”* (Laszlo, pg. 77). These mutations provide more opportunities for the offspring to be successful in changing conditions. Within the intellect we already realize that new ideas are born as a result of the mind's response to its environment. Physically and thoughtfully, new input breeds new responses, new mutations, new directions.

In the world of ideas, there can be constant evolution. The mind is actively engaged as a sensor, receiving and processing input.

“Through manipulation and constant choice, the idea to be expressed, material and process combine in a fluid action rather than a rigid sequence. Flexibility is essential to take advantage of newly discovered relationships which may determine new responses, for modifications that derive from work discoveries or intuition frequently change the initial visualization. Thus, art cannot be predetermined;

the final result evolves through discriminative and constant choices while actively engaged.”

Art/Search and Self-Discovery, by James Schinneller, 1968, pg. 3

In the cell and organism, aside from the possibility of DNA recombination leading to physical mutations, it seems plausible that changes can also be expected merely due to chance developments, which was more or less Darwin's assumption. Patterns among living things cannot be expected to remain perfect forever. Unexpected and unplanned divergence from pattern also certainly must occur in the mind, through unexpected associations and chance input.

While not all mutations, physical or idea, will prove useful in new generations, some of these changes can be beneficial to the future of organisms if the mutations adapt the creature to new conditions, thereby providing solutions for living. Great or small, changes which are helpful in promoting further beneficial life processes continue to exist in an evolving community of organisms.

The human organism is more complicated than others, due to involved mental and emotional aspects as well as physical ones. Alterations in the realms of intellect and emotion can also provide solutions to changing conditions and promote a greater enthusiasm for living. The human range of intellectual ability and emotional breadth creates complicated paths for the “evolution of ideas.” The struggle for ideas to dominate and be accepted and propagate involves subtleties beyond the visible world of the merely physical. However, parallels of life and death and propagation of species apply in intellectual and abstract realms just as in biologic ones.

ACCEPTANCE OF MUTATIONS

In biology and societies minor mutation can be easily accepted and understood by fellow organisms. Changes of small degree do not usually promote concern among fellow organisms, and the mutation can be transmitted to offspring, both in a physical sense and an idea sense. In the world of ideas and art, examples of small changes on an annual basis which are expected and viable are restructuring of automobiles and fashion. However, going too far from established recognizable forms can produce such misadventures as the Edsel. Mental miscreants or freaks such as self-mutilation in art and Nazi philosophy are comparable to the sideshow two-headed calf and dog-face boy. These latter expressions shall not long exist beyond a single generation.

Extreme mutations/changes, easily perceived as being different from that which already exists, are in danger of being outcast unless there is some “cushion” of preparedness. That which is too far afield from the already understood and acceptable is threatened by the dominant status quo, since the status quo is somehow threatened by non-understood phenomena. Organisms which are comfortable with their place and conditions need to be made thoughtfully open-minded and sensitive to new arrivals, to different forms of life and thought than that which has been customary.

New expressions confront a diverse audience, and face trials of judgment and acceptance that will result in the new form serving as either positive or negative example. Art, when it expresses itself in new appearances, can be disparaged, ignored, threatened or eliminated, if it ranges too far from the previously established. New products of thought and design require that some educational process take place, or the new and different will not pass on to a second generation.

EDUCATIONAL TRAILBREAKING

In the 1940's and 50's, Abstract Expressionism, and extension of the continuing trend of abstraction, was made very public by the advanced communications media. The work of DeKooning, Pollack, Kline, et al, hardly dry from the studio, was exposed to an entertained quizzical public. Though often held up for ridicule and misunderstanding, the work was enthusiastically supported by respected, learned and influential members of society, including critics, museum people and dealers. While a debate about merit raged, persons with an appreciation for the evolution of modern art accepted the new Abstract Expressionism as a legitimate extension in the chain of evolution of progressive thought, in the history of humankind.

Since the 1950's, there has been an abundance, at least in the attempt, of creating new art expressions. It is true, however, that but a small part of what has been "new" has garnered acceptance, and has been locked into the history books. This gleaning must be natural, considering the small audience for an avant garde, and because even the "art intelligentsia" must make difficult decisions, choosing from many expressions which seek their support.

Potential supporters of new art forms, including collectors, dealers, museum personnel and critics, still unconsciously (at least) seek among themselves for a comforting consensus. Therefore a unity in style shared by a number of individual artists can create a general confidence. The art crowd seeks identifiable "movements." Therefore the individual artist who is too radical, too far out of bounds, is much like the freak that cannot generate offspring. Without some ardent and untiring support, the idea too extreme, the art too queer, garners little or no understanding and may die a lonely death.

"OUTSIDE" INFLUENCES & ACCELERATING CHANGE

Education, in at least a general way, has created a greater public appreciation and tolerance for a broader range of ideas. Incidentally, in the field of art evolution, it appears that there may be a growing number of persons afoot actually seeking out that which is on the surface more extreme. This may have to do with recognition by some that art which has been controversial has sometimes been highly important. But, beyond that, let us consider the increase of interest in the work of "Outsider" artists.

In discussion today, outsiders are generally considered not sophisticated or trained artists, but are thought of as Naives, and beyond that may even be mentally deranged to greater or lesser extent. They are distinguished by their strangeness, curious viewpoints, peculiar expressions, technique and solitariness. Often from society's subcultures, these individuals have evolved unique styles in art as a result of their abnormal lifestyles and perceptions. Additionally, their methods of producing art objects have been arrived at without the influence of traditional teachers. These Outsiders have proven to be influences upon their sophisticated artist contemporaries as artists continue to seek out new inspiration.

These outsiders within any culture can be compared with the influence that "outsider peoples" have had upon established traditions of any society throughout the history of the world. Consider the discovery of Pompeii in the 18th century and the resultant manifestation of Neoclassical art, and view the work of the Post-Impressionists and Moderns when they were exposed to the "primitive" cultures of Tahiti, Africa and the Americas. Newly discovered "different" ideas and cultural revolutions take

place. Acculturation is a two-way street.

If artists are at the forefront of thought, relative at least to visual expression and experience, then scouring the visual expression of other people to widen one's own bounds of experience is a natural action. The search for that which is “outside” and different from one's own experience actually results in either conscious or unconscious cross-breeding. The melding of two or more elements from disparate worlds results in mutations that must be tested during the established gauntlet of any culture.

THE BEAUTY OF MUTANTS

Artists can respond to what they accidentally discover or consciously seek out, or unconsciously be affected by what they witness. The broadening range of acceptance serves to draw the visual art of the world closer together. These new products or mutations derived from a melding of different ideas are natural expressions in the same way that organisms can crossbreed and establish new forms.

There is a beauty in this; “a beauty in mutants.” For Life to be successful at all upon this planet, it has had to have the ability to adapt to changing conditions. This is true in the physical *and* idea sense. The mutation of body and idea can provide an escape from a static or hostile environment, and prepare new generations with options to exist in an environment over which they have little control.

New expressions, of Life, whether physical or mental manifestations, whether naive or sophisticated, whether prompted by chance or intelligence, are embodiments of the Natural Order of the Universe.

“Evolution is the maker of the future; at each step along the way it writes the scenario of its own continued unfolding.”

Laszlo, pg. 4

The living are on an endless path of evolution in which the alien or different is judged, and accepted or rejected. Sometimes the mutation is made acceptable by blending enough with that which is already known to be made palatable, and sometimes enough trail-breaking has been done to even make the very unusual acceptable.

By means of minor undiscerned changes or by major but supported alterations, useful mutations of organisms, thought and art lead the way to new understanding and new solutions. Change is built into the systems of Life and thought. It is unavoidable, and it is very necessary.

II. SYNTHESIS; MIND, CULTURE, ART, GAIA

“But if you will think of ourselves as coming out of the earth, rather than having been thrown in here from somewhere else, you see that we are the earth, we are the consciousness of the earth. These are the eyes of the earth. And this is the voice of the earth.”

Joseph Campbell

VISUAL ART.. THOUGHT MADE PHYSICAL

Concepts! Ideas! Then the organization of material substance which will represent idea, or at least be physical traces of thought.

Since 1910, through Kandinsky and others particularly involved in non-objective art, there has been a continuing procession of ideas about art. The thinking has become more sophisticated until ideas have reached a level requiring one to question what is more valuable and significant, the concept, the process, or the created object.

The products of art-making, the thoughts made physical, live as commodities in the real world of culture, interaction, and marketing. The objects suffer the battering of judgment by observers, critics, historians, investors, and the transitions of taste and time. The ideas, the motivations essentially behind the creation of the objects, are easily forgotten, misunderstood and reinterpreted.

While the motivating ideas do somehow come through in many works of art, the translation to other individuals' personal experiences and languages is difficult at best. Intent, sometimes not even completely comprehended by the artist, can be lost to most viewers. The art objects, the “remains” of artists thought and motivation gain new spokesmen and different meanings as time progresses.

The idea motivating the work is best represented in that limited time during which an artist can speak for the work. And, considering the inability and/or reluctance of some artists to give verbal expression to their work, it appears that the interpretation of art objects is generally and heavily weighted on the observers' side.

Expression in art is a means for an individual to accomplish several things beyond creating an acceptable and palatable picture, or passing on simple messages. Artists need not search for ideal beauty, or create illusions of reality. Art expression can speak to Humanity's conditions, extend experimental unique thought and technique, release unconscious pressures, and can lead an individual to discoveries and self-revelation. In fact, the act of expressing and the objects made in the expressing can expand maturity, increase awareness, and satisfy the need to be continually using energy for profitable result. However, ideas always go with the objects.

TODAY'S ART VIEWED TOMORROW

In a future retrospective, it is possible that the art which will be recognized as high among the most important of this century, if not the most important in a chain of similarly motivated expression, will be that which prompts us to consider our “natural” past. This is an art which acknowledges our siblinghood with the beasts, the trees, the soil.

Like some other 20th century expression, this is an art which may expose our pathologies, our illnesses in societies, but which also ameliorates our position in the Environment. No matter what the form of art coming from cities and technological advancement, there is also art which dissolves barriers between nature and humankind's self-ordained superiority . . . an art which can blend the seemingly distinct Fine Arts and the Natural World.

As we have evolved, particularly during the 19th and 20th centuries, we have lost the sources of our

materials, and lost touch with the natural links between ourselves and our natural environment. Our knowledge of chemistry and marketing of products have led us to disassociate ourselves from the sources of our media. Our paints, canvas, paper, bronze, plastic, plaster, film, brushes and whatnot, are all derived from substances occurring in Nature. So called primitive peoples, aborigines of many lands, probably recognize more of a closeness to the web of life and material than does the citified Modern. The contemporary artist rarely gathers art materials from woodland and riverbank, nor does he often seek a melding with animate Nature.

Themes of environment, Ecology, of Siblinghood, as opposed to a lack of identification with Nature, continue to surface as matters of concern for our Humanity. Hopefully, we are gradually becoming aware of the intricacy of Life and the functioning of the Earth as an organism. We must seriously consider Lovelocke's Gaia principles, and accept our vulnerability and responsibility.

Despite the concrete and automobiles, we are animals upon a planet, within the effects of a star, and lost amidst the vastness of the universe. As we distance ourselves from our natural origin we step closer to mental instability. We cannot escape the web which gave us birth, which nourishes our physical and mental processes, and which might sustain us indefinitely.

GAIA AND ART

The ramifications of considering ourselves as the conscious part of a greater whole are considerable. When we act we affect not only our fellow humans, but we alter some portion of the precious community that is the flesh of the Earth. Our concrete and steel cities are truly not separate from Nature. They are nests and the manifestation of our evolution. Rockets and submarines are not separate from Nature. They are wings and fins. Books and computers are not separate from Nature. They are extensions of our brains. Our minds, products of body and thought, are the conscious result of physical processes of Evolution over many millennia.

We witness daily an estrangement from Nature and the natural cyclical processes that pervade but which seem invisible. Lifestyles of cities and technological societies desensitize us to what is naturally present. A sensitized and receptive mind can join with our natural past, accept siblinghood with other creatures, and view the forests, seas and soil as the body of a single entity of which we are but one part.

Artists and art expression can recognize and utilize such knowledge. The individual can synthesize into objects the experiences of a multifarious world that is immersed in forces of galactic proportion. This is not mystical. This is objective reality. Scientists and artists alike can draw from knowledge that the stuff which courses through human veins is traced back to the energy igniting within the stars.

Art is the material expression of Mind. Mind is the result of evolving experiment and experience. Today's art can indeed be the World's art. Because of increased knowledge, each of us represents the world more so than ever before. Art that somehow recognizes our common heritage, our part in Natural History, can stand importantly fresh and exciting.

REGIONALISM OF MEGAEARTH AND MEGAHISTORY

Speaking for myself, I hardly consider my art locked into a temporary fashion or geographic region.

My expression might represent an eon or an entire planet.

After all, we are an important part of a planet-sized community of innumerable creatures revolving around a star which we've named Sol. As part of my culture, my experiences, there have resulted personal perceptions, a world-view, drawing upon much of history, geography, ethnography, cultures past, present and future. At least casual studies of geology, sociology, psychology, physiology, mathematics, philosophy, and popular culture are all part of my experience . . . part of personal thought. We've all been given remarkable opportunities to learn.

Ideas are built upon experience and reaction to other ideas. An artist today can draw from realms of life not easily accessible before the advent of worldwide communication and convenient travel. We can synthesize, blend, meld, combine in a conscious effort, or we can be naturally and unconsciously influence by the history, places and events which impregnate us from the invading environment.

Unlike preceding generations, we are permitted world views mixing together sophisticated and primitive thought, advanced technologies and ancient observations, and we repeatedly make choices between increasingly complicated experiences and otherwise basic patterns.

Art by human hand and intelligence is an extension of the life process, “an expression of energy and an organization of matter.” We cast our nets through experience and thought, and the harvest enters our art production. We are the consciousness of the Earth reorganizing matter as a result of our thought processes.

Each of us stops off occasionally from the train of personal evolution to organize thoughts, revise expression and express what it is we have considered and need to express.

Going through such growth and changes, it is likely one will find one has come full circle in some considerations. Once one has recognized Humanity's involvement in the natural environment, one repeatedly comes back to that consideration. We are at Home. We are an integral part of what happens here.

We have the Life Force burning within us. We extend the natural processes through thought and artistic expression. Let us each speak to issues we find significant. We grow and explore at the tip of Life's evolution, and we bear responsibility for notifying others of what we have considered.

III. SEEKING ROOTS AND ELIMINATING BARRIERS

In the preceding “*Mutations, Ideas and the Evolution of Art,*” and “*Synthesis: Mind, Culture, Art, Gaia,*” art production was considered as a process which cannot be separated from the natural processes around us. As a product of Mind, it extends natural evolutionary progression in an organization of matter and an expression of energy.

The cultures that we continually build around us are constructive product of Humankind, providing guidelines and a skeletal framework from which each of us can build our own internal belief system. Broad perceptions within the culture form warp and weft holding things together. The fabric, weak or

strong, is the environment an individual must function in, with patterns and habits naturally absorbed and imitated by each of us.

In the culture of our society, as it has evolved, many aspects of the fabric or framework reveal divisions and specializations of study, labor and discipline. These are “departmentalized,” as are the attitudes, perceptions and perspectives of the individuals engaged in such perceived disparate pursuits. Such separation, easy to propagate, contributes to a rigidity of thought, a psychosis of attitude and relationships, and hardening of culture's arteries.

Doctors, lawyers, plumbers, police, sportsmen, scientists, etc. are let into arenas with methods and thought believed to be exclusive of one another, and exclusive of art. Likewise artists and persons involved in the presentation and education of art to others see little linkage with other pursuits, in particular connections to the natural environment and origins. Gallery and museum personnel are especially geared to art technique, art politics, and art as a commodity, and are honed to think of art as distinctly separate from Nature and other manifestations of society. The art is exclusive, unlinked, pinched off from forces that enable its creation in the first place.

It is apparent that some sort of “creative process” existed long before humans walked the Earth. By the record within the Earth it is clear that there is what we interpret as “advancement” in the processes of organizing matter and Life, with Humankind's consciousness and creativity seemingly topping it off (at this stage). The evolutionary progression has been “inbuilt”, the creative process perhaps “art itself inherent in Nature”. Humans find that beauty exists in the natural environment and existed before and without Man. Ignoring mythical explanations for Human origins, the evidence also reveals that human origins are quite naturally in atomic and molecular processes, like the rest of the Universe. We are now the consciousness of the Earth, Mind considering Mind, Mind of energy and swamp and ocean and ancestors.

“Human aesthetic sensitivities are nature related... the art-making of nature is everywhere evident, in the streamlining of forms, graceful and integrated structures, colour and shape... nature must be inherently congenial to the aesthetic process and the dominant aesthetic appeal of nature should therefore be seen as the expression of its capacity for art. The concept that the Universe could be self-creative has never been a part of Western thought. The dismissal of a Creator has left the Universe without any means of teleological guidance.”

Frank Avray Wilson, *Art as Revelation* pp. 189-190, Centaur Press Ltd. 1981

The art maker, educator, connoisseur, trained to believe art as being distinctly different from, and elevated above, Natural Conditions apart from Nature, is not only wrong but is unfulfilled as a thinking organism. For art as a process and product to be best understood, most healthy, thriving and effective in benefiting individual and societal conditions, it must be recognized as a concomitant, concurrent, integral part of Nature and of other manifestations in culture.

“Nature is art, and in time a humanized, creative primate had to emerge because of an inherent aesthetic potential in matter... the hypothesis of enlightened materialism, which included the aesthetic faculty... a growing number of scientists are preoccupied with the metaphysical realm as an inbuilt natural feature.”

Wilson, Ibid., pp. 196-197

We produce art as a result of the natural processes within us. Art is our expression, a reaction to being stimulated in various ways by the environment around us, which includes the environs of Nature as well as human originated physical and psychological states. Art can be a response to the beauty of what we find, a means of therapy as individuals attempt to deal with realities they face, and a previously existing inbuilt quality of matter and energy. Art remains an integral part of synthesizing tangible and intangible Nature into new potentially valuable combinations, but suffers from the “departmentalized system” we have imposed.

Synthesis, a joining and running together of Humankind's Cultures, studies and beliefs, and beyond that an integration of us with Earth and its processes. Holistic Art, the creative act of speaking for us, refreshing, enriching, sustaining and healing, uniting disparities. Departmentalizing severs an organ from the body, rendering the part and the whole less useful, if not entirely useless.

Let us reevaluate, removing the blinders and myopic vision, thereby seeking roots and goals that strengthen and illuminate.

“Present-day materialism and the obsession with new technologies have tended to obscure mankind's true place in nature's cycle... The increasing urbanization, artificiality and pollution of life, mental and physical, have cut people off from what should be their natural heritage. Today we are all struggling for life, like plants without roots; and it is our empathy with the planet earth which we have lost.”

Janet and Colin Bord, Earth Rites p.xiii, Book Club Associates, 1982