Other Than Human Means

Hands sheathed in slick, waxy rubber gloves cradle an unknown artefact. The carcass of a plump roasted pig lies prostrate on a platter. A ubiquitous ruby-red apple wedged beneath its snout. The parched chalky surface of the moon gives way to pitch darkness. The only thing discernible on the horizon is a verdant, cloud strewn earth, partially illuminated. The rounded aperture of a glossy, obsidian Magic 8 Ball resembles a camera. With its calculated stare, it seems to be gazing up at me as it yields its truths. A model figurine of a space marine is posed ready to strike, armour a shade of azure blue so rarely seen in the natural world yet so common to computer animations. A solemn woman robed also in blue kneels in the grass. She holds before her a sheet of cloth which bears the visage of Christ.

Sifting through this series of pencil drawings and gouache paintings by artist Charlie Donaldson, I am aware of the strange sensation that meaning is both retreating and revealing itself at the same time. These drawings tell me little of their past, their authors, the worlds in which they were first displayed. They remind me, their viewer, that I know very little. Regardless, fragments of narrative seem to coalesce in the nebulous realms of my subconscious. A lavish Tudor feast. A table groaning under the weight of elaborate, sumptuous platters. A homesick astronaut gazes miserably back at the far-flung planet on which their lover resides, completely unreachable. An archaeologist gingerly reaches out to dust off a foreign object partially embedded in sandy red sedimentary rock.

Upon further inspection, some images reoccur: macro views of rock formations and the dappled patinas that bloom across their surface. The encyclopaedic definition of a cave is a naturally

occurring void, a cavernous enclave where jagged, pockmarked rockface opens up to reveal smooth stony strata worn down by ancient oceans and subterranean rivers. Just at the point at which the rocky expanse is swallowed into darkness, an arrangement of painted forms are faintly discernible. The heavy arch of a bison's back, grass and what look to be footprints adorn the cave's interior in muted tones of ochre and sienna. To where do they wander? Who carefully inscribed their existence in earthen tones? For what reason? These painted forms are at once familiar and entirely unknowable, obfuscated by a dense accumulation of time passed. Indeed, many prehistoric cave paintings have been difficult to carbon date, more recently it was discerned that this was because they had been revised over centuries. These are not static images but collaborative imaginings.[1] Early 20th century anthropologists interpreted cave paintings as a form of "utilitarian hunting magic"[2]. I am struck by the thought that even in the fathomless depths of our primordial past, images were believed to have the power to enact change in the physical world.

Donaldson's drawings of cave paintings become a nexus for the exhibition *Anecdotes* which presents a seemingly perplexing array of found images. Each image is embedded within an intricate frame of Lego bricks which when joined together hold several images in distinct networks. Held in conjunction with one another, Donaldson constructs an elusive taxonomy, laden with cyphers that a viewer might decode over time.

If I glance quickly at some of the drawings of cave paintings, they begin to blur. I could be looking at the waxy seams of fat that ripple a large cut of meat or undulating mitochondrial masses beneath

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[1]Zach Zorich, "A Chauvet Primer". *Archaeology. 64 (2): 39.* (March–April 2011).
https://archive.archaeology.org/1103/features/werner_herzog_chauvet_cave_primer.html
[2] "Hunting magic in rock art*". Bradshaw Foundation*. 9 December 2019.
https://bradshawfoundation.com/news/rock_art.php?id=Hunting-magic-in-rock-art

a microscope. Initially, Donaldson's drawings render the images unfamiliar. Devoid of material context they are somewhat flattened by the layers of coloured pencil marks built up to delineate changes in light. Coloured pencil is an interesting choice. The medium cannot escape its pedagogical associations of young students using maudlin primary colours to recount their summer holidays or illustrate a world map. This association is I think intentional. In the same way that the pencil infers a child learning to visually inscribe the world, Lego infers the construction of possible worlds. We use such playful activities to teach children the fundamentals of human knowledge. Here Donaldson's work reminds me of the strange, fantastical ways that children piece together meaning, the ways in which adults go on to encounter misunderstandings and double meanings that birth aberrant and wonderful new ideas.

Donaldson's constructions borrow from the aesthetics of games: the complex narrative world-building of video games and the logical structures of board games, a linear network of connotations and juxtapositions. Donaldson's diagrammatic Lego frames sprawl like an expanded grid that could be considered akin to Dutch artist Piet Mondrian's *Composition with Blue, Yellow, Red, Black and Grey* (1922). Considering grids brings to mind American art critic Rosalind Krauss's discussion of the grid as a "matrix of knowledge" and an "emblem of an infrastructure of vision".[3] Kraus discusses the perspectival grid as a "demonstration of the way reality and its representation could be mapped onto one another, the way the painted image and its real-world referent did in fact relate to one another- the first being a form of knowledge about the second". Having seen many of Donaldson's projects over the years, his work has always demonstrated to me the

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[3] Rosalind Krauss, *"Grids". October* , Summer, 1979, Vol. 9 pp. 50-64.

mechanics of *how* we look: our yearning to build relationships and construct order. Unlike Krauss's perspectival grid that clearly delineates the apparatuses of representation, somewhere in the body of work made for *Anecdotes,* semiotics becomes slippery and the image is left abandoned, bereft of it of its referent.

Returning to the cave paintings, scholars have long struggled to determine the exact content of these images.[4] As foundational documents of early human society we yearn for them to yield their secret meanings, to provide us with a more concrete understanding of our history. Subsequently, we attribute significances and construct meanings that may be unfounded. The term *pareidolia* is defined as the tendency to perceive specific, often meaningful images within random or ambiguous visual patterns.[5] In his essay *Rock Art and Pareidolia,* Australian archaeologist Robert Bednarik asserts that our consciousness makes sense of the external world by using that which we have seen in the past to make up a foundational rubric for interpreting the present.[6] In popular culture this notion has expanded into a variety of scenarios in which one might construct meaning where there is none: from finding pillowy faces in billowing clouds, to Marian apparitions in everyday objects, or people hearing hidden messages and voices in the whirring noises emitted from machinery.

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[4]David S Whitley, *Cave Paintings and the Human Spirit: The Origin of Creativity and Belief.* (Prometheus: New York, 2009). p. 35. ISBN 978-1-59102-636-5.

[5] Robert G. Bednarik, "Rock Art and Pareidolia", *Rock Art Research* 2016 - Volume 33, Number 2, pp. 167-181.

[6]"Consciousness is thought to focus attention on processing incoming external stimuli of the organism's environment, but in effect it is heavily influenced by previous experience…Essentially, we see what we expect to see, because it is more difficult and time consuming to see what we do not expect to see. This is where pareidolia comes into play: it is part of the shortcut the visual system takes in order to arrive at decisions of how to respond to visual signals." Bednarik, *Rock Art, 168*

Etymologically, the word was first used in medical journals to describe "a changing or partial hallucination, or the perception of secondary images".[7]

Hallucinatory images haunt these drawings which, floating on blank expanses of paper, seem to eschew traditional pictorial logic. An apparition is quite literally depicted in the drawing of cloth imprinted with the spectral face of Christ. The drawing is a facsimile of German artist Hans Memling's painting *Veil of Veronica* (1470), which depicts a Christian relic bearing a holy image "produced by other than human means".[8] This form of representation is known as an acheiropoieton, or that which is "made without hand".[9] A ghostly image with no corporeal creator. I think of the absurd and at times horribly uncanny images conjured forth by artificially intelligent computers such as DALL.E 2. Ostensibly these computer-generated images seem playful, yet their 'lightness' is misleading. These images conceal a kernel of unease, simulacrum that at first glance deceive, but upon closer inspection forms become corrupted, bleeding into another – edges blur and slip into a grotesque composition. German artist Hito Steyerl talks of digital pictorial degradation in her essay *In Defence of the Poor Image* in which she described the phenomenon as "a copy in motion… as it accelerates, it deteriorates". It is the "ghost" of an image.[10]

[7] Karl Ludwig Kahlbaum, "Die Sinnesdelirien" [On Delusion of the Senses], *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Psychiatrie und psychisch-gerichtliche Medizin.* 1866. 23: 1–86.

[8] Neil MacGregor, "Seeing Salvation". *Images of Christ in Art,* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2000) ISBN 0-563-55111-9.

[9] MacGregor, "Seeing Salvation", 2000.

[10] Hito Steyerl, "In Defence of the Poor Image", *e-flux Journal,* No. 10, (November 2009):1. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/.

A pencil drawing quite literally demonstrates the hand with which it was made: smooth linear contours and feathery cross hatching. Whilst the act of image construction maintains a physical presence, I would postulate that Donaldson is perhaps more preoccupied with the distribution and digital dissemination of such images, 'without hand'. Donaldson's practice considers the sticky, serpentine digital pathways through which images whirl: from hard-drive or database, to blog, to post, to meme. Donaldson devises a singular archival mythology, one with its own inherent logic: collating, synthesising and appropriating visual material in a manner which challenges notions of the ownership and authorship of images.

Visual language in the digital realm shifts, twists and turns at a dizzying pace. Donaldson's work reflexively considers the ways stories have been told across time. I return to a work I spent much time with that Donaldson exhibited at c3 Contemporary Art Space. *Crisis Ending* (2018) is a digital print on a plastic surface so slick I could almost imagine the plane of the image sliding down the gallery wall. Newspaper titles announce starkly: *A perfect storm of bad timing led to the first intergalactic hostage situation. Attack Rebuffed. Atmospheric side effects of the machine were well documented in the area throughout the late nineties.* Topological maps mark the location of unspecified events. Children in institutional clothing are placed in heavy metal diving masks, guarded by marine corps. Here Donaldson unpacks the many ways that words and images might act as co-conspirators, manipulating one another in order to perpetuate certain narratives.

Donaldson's work has long studied the preposterous and complex trajectories of information dissemination. Previous projects such as *THE UFO KNOWLEDGE ASSOCIATION, 1986 – 1993* (2019-2020) involved expansive diagrammatic prints that chronicle the logic and semiotic

constructions of early websites documenting conspiracy theories at the advent of the internet. Similarly, Donaldson's new drawings are also sourced from the deepest bowels of the web, downloaded, collected and drawn – their original source often lost to time and the vastness of digital space. This becomes a heretical archival practice, a magical act of historiographical divination. Deprived of their original source, this deluge of images become disparate, devoid of a concrete index and yet the more one looks fantastical connections materialise. For *Anecdotes,* Donaldson chronicles methods of image circulation and interpretation, encouraging us to reflect on the wonders and problems of imaging the world to make sense of it.

Donaldson and I speak on Zoom, our faces pixelating at the edges, gestures crystalise as we become frozen for a second. My account's free-plan time limit abruptly and violently ejects us from Zoom's illusory discursive space into our respective surroundings in Naarm and Meanjin. Moments before our conversation is cut short, Donaldson speaks to me about his interest in the ways we might try to communicate to the future, to unknown readers. He speaks of the macabre necessity of nuclear waste warnings, their attempt to articulate themselves, to speak across unintelligible expanses of time. As my eyes drift across the desktop of my newly blank screen, I think of Michael Madsen's documentary *Into Eternity*, its melancholic footage of the Olkiluoto Nuclear Power Plant in Finland. An anachronistic sign reads: "the danger is still present, in your time as it was in ours." [11]

Written Charlie Donaldson's Exhibition Anecdotes at SEVENTH Gallery, April 2023

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[11] *Into Eternity,* directed by Michael Madsen (Films Transit International, Denmark, 2010)