# VAULT

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# AI & SUPERFICTIONS: FORWARD THROUGH FICTION

Peter Hill delves into his archive to ask what the future might look like.

ESSAY *by* PETER HILL

In 1989, when I created the world's largest (fictional) museum on New York's Park Avenue – The Museum of Contemporary Ideas (MoCI) – the world was in flux. The Berlin Wall had been hammered down. Tiananmen Square ran with innocent blood. What was called 'government propaganda' was on the rise. It was becoming increasingly hard to tell what was true and what was false.

At the 1987 *documenta*, two years earlier, there was a high-tech computer-generated artwork made by a German artist who had purchased declassified CIA satellite imagery. By scrutinising it more carefully than the CIA, he was able to locate Chinese silkworm missiles in Iran. Was this correct? Or had the imagery been deliberately falsified by the CIA?

The only visible signs of my museum were the press releases I sent to Reuters, Associated Press and all the world's leading art magazines: *Parkett* (Switzerland), *Artforum* (New York), *Artscribe* (London), *Artpress* (Paris), *C Magazine* (Canada), *Tension* (Australia), *Flash Art* (Milan), *ALBA* (Scotland), *Circa* (Northern Ireland) and 40 others. I mentioned the above *documenta* artwork in the first of those press releases, in 1989. The third press release that I issued (this was initially a 'mail art' project) centred around the museum's Head of Computing, Dr Harald 'Zimmer' Fraem. Its focus was the release of his 'Top 100 Words and Phrases' used in the art world that year. To compile this, he fed every issue of every art magazine into his main-frame computer, filtering out the most common words. It was programmed to pick out recurring words and phrases, such as 'post-gender issues' or 'deconstruction'. I've recently rediscovered this press release, 35 years later, within my superfiction archive (appropriately produced on an old-fashioned typewriter, placed in an envelope and deposited in a post box).

The top 10 spots on that list were:
1. Post-modernism
2. Modernism
3. Fiction
4. Humour
5. Irony
6. Appropriation
7. Complexity
8. Fake
9. Deconstruction
10. Secondary Market

At the other end of the list there was 'Intelligent Gloves' at 88, 'Synthetic Modernism' at 98 and 'Death of the Curator' at 100.

What would Dr Fraem's list look like if it were reissued in 2023? A year in which (just as we are getting over NFTs and cryptocurrencies), we've seen the arrival of the 'Machine Learning Revolution' and 'Generative AI'. Possibly, it might look like this:
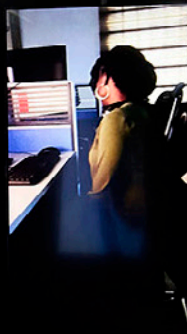1. Climate Emergency
2. AI
3. Dall-E 7
4. Quantum Singularities
5. Liminal Space
6. Fake News
7. ChatGPT
8. ASI (Artificial Super-Intelligence)
9. #MeToo
10. Mass Extinctions

And across the rest of the list we might find 'Iteration' at 12, 'Uberduck' at 21, 'Neo-Trompe l'Oeil' at 36, 'The Paperclip Maximizer' at 72, 'Interrogate' at 83 and 'Synthetic Modernism' at 100.

Writing about the afore mentioned 'Machine Learning Revolution' in the September 2023 edition of *The Monthly*, Shane Danielson (formerly director of the Edinburgh International Film Festival) succinctly constructs a word picture to help us realise the enormity of this sentience revolution. "You need to imagine something more intelligent than us by the same difference that we're more intelligent than a frog," he writes. And I'd be tempted to

# WHATEVER THE BENEFITS OF AI (AND THE ART WORLD IS SUCH A TINY PART OF THE ENTIRE AI LANDSCAPE), WHAT IF WE HAVE CREATED A GLOBAL VERSION OF ROBODEBT, OR BANK ACCOUNT SCAMMING, AND IT GOES ON TO RECREATE ITSELF IN SHIVA-LIKE FORMS?



Above
GEORGIA BANKS
*DataBaes*, 2022– 23
Installation view,
on display as part of the
*Melbourne Now* exhibition at
The Ian Potter Centre: NGV
Australia, Melbourne 2023
Photo: Peter Bennetts

Below
ANNE SCOTT WILSON
*Seeing Not Looking*, 2019
video, preprogrammed
automated drone camera,
sensors, dancers Charles
Ball+Jake McLarnon
dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist



multiply this by factors of 10, then 100, then a million, within increasingly shorter timeframes. It's like compound interest on steroids. And just as cryptocurrencies are all about 'increasing risk' to an unacceptable degree (what I think of as the 'chain letter syndrome'), AI is about intelligence speeding up generationally, like a nest of mayflies – except the generations get shorter and shorter, and the dangers bigger and bigger.

And if you ask about the advantages, of which there are many (London's *Financial Times* reported on September 2, 2023 in an article headlined "What happens if everything becomes predictable?" that "it is now possible to sequence the 3 billion base pairs of a human genome for less than £200, in under eight hours, using a machine no larger than a suitcase"), consider that the first whistle blowers on AI's potential dangers were the CEOs of the big tech companies who you would intuitively think stand to gain most from its development. Collectively, to the surprise of many, they called for a moratorium on AI development. Some of them – including Elon Musk, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Alphabet Google's CEO Sundar Pichai and OpenAI CEO Sam Altman – delivered their warnings of 'civilisational risk' to the U.S. senate, behind closed doors.

Danielson starts his essay by looking at the practical implications of the AI phenomenon through the lens of the 2023 Hollywood writers and actors' strikes. This is where theory becomes practice. Whatever the benefits of AI (and the art world is such a tiny part of the entire

AI landscape), what if we have created a global version of Robodebt, or bank account scamming, and it goes on to recreate itself in Shiva-like forms? Or it decides, unilaterally, that our endangered planet with its estimated 2.13 million species would be better off collectively without one of them: homo sapiens? Or it becomes a fake news propaganda tool for Trump, Putin and their ilk?

But let's park the *Gattica*-like dystopias in order to look at what is happening here and now, in the art world. Mithu Sen, recently exhibiting at ACCA, has probably made more great leaps forward (especially in subverting AI) than anyone else on the world stage. Amalia Lindo and Georgia Banks, separately, made strong AI-assisted contributions to the 2023 presentation of *Melbourne Now*.

A recent panel session at Sydney Contemporary saw four art magazine editors – from *Artlink*, *VAULT*, *ArtNews New Zealand* and *Art Monthly Australasia* respectively – give overviews, very collegially, of the future of art writing in this age of AI (among other topics). After attending, I set out to find how studio-based artists were experimenting with this new digital palette. Did it give them a greater sense of creative freedom, or did they feel enslaved to it?

At Gertrude Contemporary, I enjoyed a fascinating discussion between the two exhibiting artists, Sydney-based Sarah Contos and Brisbane-born but Melbourne-based Lou Hubbard, moderated by Director Mark Feary. AI technology features strongly in Contos' new work, and I caught up with her later to ask more about her experience

of using AI in the studio. Contos' multi-part installation is titled *In the Belly of Mary Shelley* (2023) and, according to the room notes, draws on "the set design and psychological impact of German expressionist theatre and film" by embracing three interrelated film works. The works created through AI are not fixed or static like conventional artworks but they "open up new methodologies for narrative construction, evolving the possibility of temporal progression within these moving image works."

"I used Stable Diffusion version 1.4 in making my *Moth-eRR* film work," Contos tells me. "At the time, and this was only early this year [2023], this was the latest version of it. The images created by the computer were clunky and unrealistic – it was almost human in the naïve way the program saw the world, and I loved that. It was the only medium that made sense to use in order to communicate the non-existent experience I had of motherhood. Using a program that collages other images to create a 'version' of a non-existent thing perfectly expressed this. It's interesting that this SD [Stable Diffusion] version has now

SARAH CONTOS
*Moth-eRR* (film stills), 2023
film in three chapters
digital video
6 minutes

Courtesy the artist,
STATION, Melbourne and
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
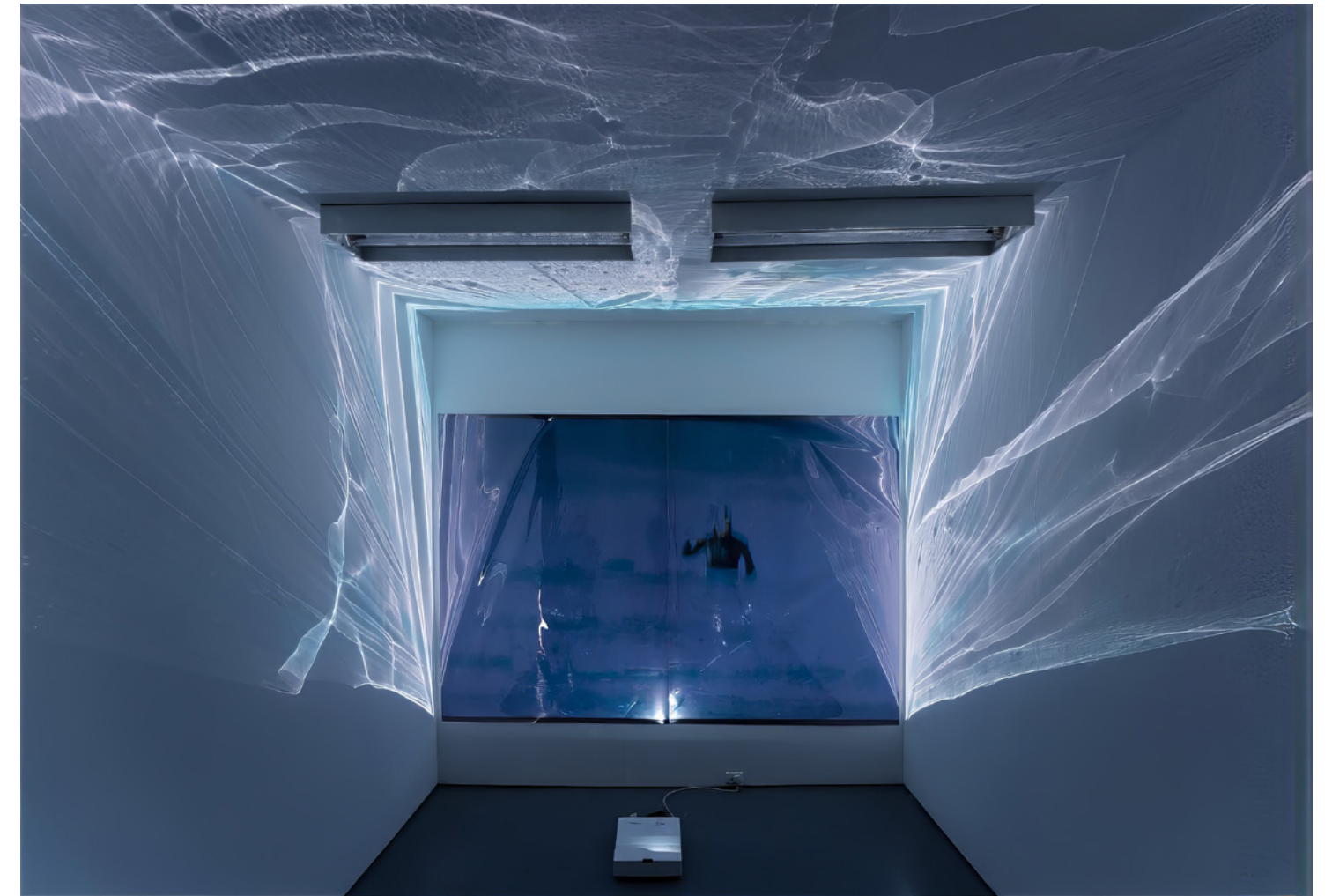
been updated, so the images I used in the animation have become 'vintage' in the space of a few months."

And what dangers, I wondered, or advantages, do you see for the use of AI, both in the art world and the broader reality of finance, war, the environment, health, education?

"I have contradictory thoughts about all that," she said. "On the one hand, I am incredibly excited to see where this technology will lead, and the multiplicity of ways it can be used. We are only at the early 'child stage' of this new age. On the other hand, the power it wields is mind-blowingly terrifying in terms of the spread of disinformation, and the incomprehensible economic gains it promises. Apart from Stable Diffusion, I have been slightly apprehensive to use AI in other ways, as all interactions feed it. In terms of art, the thought of everything becoming the same – a homogenised version of what is considered 'perfection' – runs the risk of the beauty found in imperfections and failures becoming extinct. And eventually, perhaps, the disappearance of what is uniquely personal and the authenticity of human emotion, along with the energy and time it takes to make art with agency. All this may just be reduced to a prompt."

I then spoke to Melbourne artist Anne Wilson, once a dancer and choreographer – as you can tell from her many references to movement when she talks about her art. She creates work that is startlingly fresh using a fusion of old and new technologies, ranging from pinhole cameras to AI.

"I have a love/hate relationship with technology," she later confirms in an email. "In the age of AI, my practice parallels with 'sets of instructions' used by artists in the 1960s, such as:

· Choose a location where you can see the sun on the horizon line at dusk
· Spin slowly with a pinhole camera in your hand
· Imagine it is your eye
· Track the sun on the horizon with your 'prosthetic eye' while spinning
· While spinning, calculate how long you need to get an image on the sensor

"AI is also a set of instructions," she continues, "or a program … measuring, calculating, identifying, intervening and training sentient beings to think as it does. That is why I hate AI while loving using it. It's a paradox. From primitive technologies to motion capture and fully-automated programmed drone cameras, technology is a collaborator in my work. Making art with AI is a tango, a dance of resistance and submission. It is about learning, and fighting against learning. Fighting against the rules of engagement that AI demands. As AI gets better at predicting human/sentient motion/emotion/activities, the way I use technology has changed to become more frenzied – as in my work in *Fugitive States*, an exhibition of pinhole photos mutilated through a tussle with technology, emerging as painted photo-sculptures. These carry both human and non-human marks, urgently hauling the virtual back into the physical."

A final thought. I remember when, as the 1960s turned into the '70s, commercial 'air-brushes' first became available in art schools. They spread across disciplines like a virus. Painters used them, as did graphic designers, illustrators of record albums, textile students and set designers. They took over t-shirt design and automobile decoration. They were almost the opposite of Rosalind Krauss' notion of the 'post-medium condition'. Overnight they became the 'only-medium condition'. Within five years they were gone, their contribution seen as cliché. **V**

Above
ANNE SCOTT WILSON
*LightSpin*, 2022
Installation view,
Five Walls, Footscray
video projection
16mm hi speed to video,
reflective surface
dimensions variable

Photo: Matthew Stanton