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Sci-Art Doubts and Disruptions

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Among the ideas and meanings it explores, sci-art doubts these: art with intent, and natural with supernatural. Pry apart those assumptions until their halves exist individually, independently of one another — like water and gravity, pruned from a river.

In the meantime, consider more clichéd reactions to the sci-art collaboration: the vulnerability to receiving attention only for the pairing's superficial novelty — the surprise at combining two stereotypically opposite ends of a spectrum, the romance of a Romeo and Juliet improbable tryst of epistemologies; or it can be dismissed as a charmingly naive overestimation of the intellectual depth its wonder-and-awe subjects can provoke; or among some who cannot find in its products the comfort of those familiar, entrenched conventions that define science and art separately, the criticism that each domain simply ends up compromised to its detriment by their attempt at unification.

Like many nascent and inevitable ideas, however, the prosaic critiques only persist until emerging nuances begin to cleave and splinter off new perspectives and provocations. The story of Romeo and Juliet did not suppress cultural tensions beneath the passions of romance, but rather submitted them to fiery revelation. So must it be with the frictions of sci-art. The sensations of wonder and awe possess an ease that can stifle recognition of their intricate meanings, just as the sublime beauty of a night sky conceals the truly hellish complexities that are stars. Under the auspices of its seemingly incongruous yet straightforward name, sci-art must search for old truths and untried structures of meaning and relevancy waiting to be disturbed and envisioned. Among those is its interrogation of the two marriages mentioned above: natural with supernatural, and art with intent.

The latter has had a head start. The sanctity of artistic intent, the canon that assumed visual artworks are defined by the effects of a human intermediary micro-managing brushstrokes or strikes of a chisel to meet the discriminations of connoisseurship, was disrupted in the early 20th century by artists like Kazimir Malevich and Marcel Duchamp, employed in varying degrees by artists such as Kurt Schwitters, Robert Rauschenberg, and Helen Frankenthaler, radicalized by Jackson Pollock et al, conceptualized by Sol LeWitt and Dorothea Rockburne, brought to music by John Cage, and spread ubiquitously into the delta of the next century's myriad artistic provocations. It was a change in harmonics, for at some higher frequency intent remained present but ironically so, there to expressly agitate conjecture around the ideal of its absence.

The lure of that absence was in the desire to arrive at an art liberated from the biases of subjectivity and which gained, like science, its power from an enthrallment with objective realities rather than imagined fictions. Artworks that were objects in real space, rather

than windows through which to peer into fictional space, shifted the ontological paradigm from imaginary to real — from depiction to actual, myth to science. They symbolized a preference for locating sources of transcendence in the real rather than in the depicted, which was metaphorically the natural rather than the supernatural. The artistic products of that history and of sci-art are like sensory detectors that have traced this wave of ontological change propagating through the past and into our present moment.

Prying loose the heavily rooted meme of the supernatural and its fictions from its old-growth-forest of entanglements within the human psyche and its institutions, is an unavoidable disruption of the sci-art interrogation. Modern and contemporary art is in essence a propagator of biologically based transcendent sensations (dubbed ‘spiritual experiences’ in other walks of life where their origin is attributed to causes beyond the natural), while science recognizes and evidences only the natural and rejects anything gimmicked to be otherwise. In their new role together, the two cannot escape the obligation to a discourse on how such transcendence does not imply an appeasement or collusion by science with the supernatural meme, but rather a call to better understand and appreciate the biology of human feelings and intuitions. Were such an appeasement of the supernatural to be implied rather than rejected, art would become not a partner with science, but instead its antagonist in a promotion of pseudoscience.

The understanding that transcendent sensations can be kindled purely from an encounter with the unintended “diagram of forces” that is nature, is one disruption by which art conveys greater nuance and complex meanings to science. The implications of this secular poetic are broadly subversive on a planet where most human cultures are heavily invested in the idea of a natural world that veils some higher order of magical-supernatural governance. The vector of change in art over the last two centuries points elsewhere, however, suggesting those sensations we cite as evidence of life's profound meanings are privileged murmurs from our evolved biology, not the deific — their enchantments distilled from an elegantly natural reality.