Transhuman Artists and Their Art in William Gibson's Sprawl Trilogy

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Abstract

William Gibson's Sprawl Trilogy has left an indelible mark on pop culture and has even influenced the trajectory of digital technologies. While not the first purveyor, Gibson is often credited with popularizing the science fiction subgenre known as cyberpunk. Gibson himself never championed the term himself, but he certainly benefited from its zeitgeist. At their core, Gibson's futuristic techno-laden narratives owe as much to the crime fiction of the 1930's and 1940's as they do to the science fiction of the 1970's and 1980's. Much like Dashiell Hammett's socially conscious crime fiction, Gibson's techno-noir has much more than the plot moves going on. Gibson's Sprawl is a tactful takedown of the burgeoning materialistic consumer driven society of the 1980's. Gibson did not write these novels as a warning for the future, but as a spotlight for contemporary issues. Ironically Gibson has been championed for influencing and enhancing the very technological capitalist society he skewers. Gibson coined the term cyberpunk, copies of his first novel *Neuromancer* were passed around the offices for computer companies for inspiration. Gibson's impact on technology has tainted scholarship pertaining to his works. William Gibson is concerned with the role of the artist and their art in a society saturated with new media products and bodily augmentation. Gibson focuses on the importance of artists and art and their role in opening lines of communication between isolated; traumatized characters.

Author Biography

Timothy R. Letteney is, most importantly, a father of two brave, intelligent, and clever girls, Ivy and Quinn. He owes all of his successes to his equally brave, intelligent, and clever wife, Jill.

A graduate of the University of Massachusetts Amherst's English program, Tim also became certified in Technical Writing and Professional Communication as a last ditch effort to become marketable. Tim also wrote for the UMass Daily Collegian where he gleefully interviewed Bruce Campbell of *Evil Dead* fame.

Tim is currently the Director of Marketing and Communications at the Harvard Museums of Science & Culture, where he hopes to use his evil knack for marketing products people don't need for good.

Tim hopes to get back into writing fiction and screenplays once his academic work is complete.

Dedication

For Jill, Ivy, and Quinn

"Everything"

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my wife, Jill for putting up with me. I can be...obsessive. I know it requires a special kind of patience putting up with me, and I appreciate your support. Since I started this process, we've bought a car, a condo, refinanced a condo, had two kids, and five jobs between us. It's been crazy and amazing. Thank you for loving me and helping me along the way.

I'd also like to thank you children, Ivy and Quinn. You have both inspired me to finish this thesis. I want to make you proud on my graduation day. I'd also like to buy you some candy as a thank you. I want you both to know that education is important, as long as it makes you happy. I love learning new things and processing challenging ideas. Our world is saturated with products and information. It is an educational institutions job to curate this knowledge. Don't be led astray by emotional "facts." Trust science. That being said, don't let these institutions fleece you. They'll take every dime you have if you're not smart about it.

I'd like to thank my Mom and Dad. I'm a grown man, and I still rely on your guidance and grace. Thank you for being role models well into my adulthood.

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Chapter I

Introduction

William Gibson's Sprawl Trilogy has done something few science fiction novels manage to do. Gibson's narratives not only remain societally relevant more than three decades after their publication; they have influenced artists, inventors, and corporations worldwide. Gibson's first novel, *Neuromancer* is credited with popularizing the subgenre of science fiction called cyberpunk. Gibson took concepts found in John Brunner's *The Shockwave Rider* and injected frenetic prose and a seemingly punk attitude. Brunner's novel imagines the societal manifestation of Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*. Brunner creates a world where technology is progressing so quickly humanity struggles to adapt and become disoriented. The most adaptive humans sacrifice their own personalities, creating new personas much like the avatars of today's online world. While Gibson's characters are saturated with the rapid evolution of technological capitalism, they do not suffer "future shock" in the same way that Brunner's character's do. Rather Gibson's characters have almost completely merged with the rapidly changing technology. Gibson's characters are not disoriented; they attempt to mentally escape their trauma by engulfing themselves in digital media, art, and crime.

Cyberpunk is often defined as science fiction that is rife with advanced forms of technology which takes place in a cityscape or earthly locale. The characters are often anti-establishment, use drugs, and walk the line of cool and impoverished. Many of Gibson's characters live in poverty working from one illegal activity to the next. These characters are

juxtaposed with multinational corporate entities who own both the physical and digital worlds. Often these corporate entities made the street-level characters tools of their wills. These street-level characters represent the large portion of humanity left behind during rapid technological change. These characters embark on journeys to reclaim their humanity, create meaningful connections with sentient life, and heal psychic and physical traumas.

William Gibson has such a great talent for creating these dystopian worlds and filling his pages with his own technological creations that many readers miss the key themes of his works. Through the three main works in the Sprawl Trilogy, *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero*, and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, Gibson creates a nuanced and hyper-stylized futuristic world whose hip characters inspired decades of corporate commodities. Many readers focus on decoding Gibson's inventions. Through his "Sprawl Trilogy," Gibson accidentally provided a roadmap for electronic consumer products. I believe this was unintended, rather Gibson aimed to examine on what it means to be human in a world brimming with corporate commodities. and how to heal traumas suffered by the rapid march of time and technocapitalism.

This thesis aims to explore this roadmap and the tools Gibson uses to lead his characters to their lost humanity. By examining the role of the artist and art in the "Sprawl Trilogy" I hope to uncover the intended themes of the Gibson's novels.

Chapter II

Cracking the Case: Transhuman Art and Artists in *Neuromancer*

"The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" (1). The opening line from William Gibson's first novel, *Neuromancer*, has been featured in most scholarship pertaining to the novel, and for good reason. Gibson's prose evokes not only the idea of a sky polluted by corporations and the virulent growth of technology but it also conjures a surrealist image that questions the very nature of reality. Gibson's hyper-industrialized post war world constantly attacks authenticity and the very nature of humanity. The denizens of the Sprawl (a massive cityscape stitched into the eastern seaboard) are trapped in post-traumatic stress and they retreat into new forms of media in search of escape, meaning and protection from an otherwise hostile world. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay argues that "in Gibson's world, human beings have nothing left but thrill. It is all that power can offer, but it is also –the ambivalence again– the only way to create new conditions, since old philosophical-moral considerations mean nothing in a world where one can plug in another's feelings…"(276). Paradoxically, Gibson's characters take refuge in dehumanizing thrill-seeking activities like hacking, body modification, and simulation stimulation as a refuge from the corporate world that at once threatens their humanity and offers them a reprieve by providing them products allowing for the shedding of flesh. Terence Whalen writes, "*Neuromancer's* ostensibly post-industrial characters remain under the spell of a multinational consumerism heralded by an endless array of gadgets. From designer drugs to biomedical implants to amnesic prostitutes called meat puppets, this is a world which

relentlessly turns people into things" (84). Gibson's characters have been bred to believe that transcendence is an out of body experience, but what happens what corporations sell out of body experiences like flavors of ice cream? A true transcendental experience must become a balance of body and soul, and in order for that to happen; the character's shattered psyche must be mended with a new form of art.

We see the Sprawl through the eyes of our protagonist Henry Dorsett Case. At the start of the novel Case is seemingly at the end of his career as a hacker, or console cowboy. His nervous system has been damaged by his old mafia like employers and he can no longer "jack in" to "consensual hallucination" known as cyberspace. Case is trapped inside a society that values consumerism over everything. This is illustrated when Case finds

> "...himself staring through a shop window. The place sold small bright objects to the sailors. Watches, flicknives, lighters, pocket VTRs, simstim decks, weighted manriki chains, and shuriken….They were mounted against scarlet ultrasuede with nearly invisible loops of nylon fishline, their centers stamped with dragons or yinyang symbols. They caught the streets neon and twisted it, and it came to Case that these were the stars under which he voyaged, his destiny spelled out in constellation of cheap chrome" (11-12).

In this scene, Case is compared to maritime voyagers who used the constellations for wayfinding, and science-fiction protagonists from the golden age of science fiction who traversed the stars in spaceships. Case's heroic journey takes place inside a limitless computer network as he traverses cyberspace using his mind and creativity as a vessel. It is no coincidence that Case's name refers to a Macguffin-like suitcase. He is a closed person who keeps his emotions and memories in check; the only place Case opens up, accessing his emotionality, is inside cyberspace. Case craves cyberspace like an addict craves drugs. He feels trapped inside his body, "the body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh" (6).

The disconnectedness of mind and body proliferate the novel; scholars often argue Case seeks transcendence in cyberspace. I disagree. Case carries a death wish from the corporeal world to the ethereal world of cyberspace. Case's expulsion from cyberspace has sent him on a drug addled, self-destructive bender that could result in his untimely death.

Glenn Grant argues that Case "tries to recreate cyberspace with drugs: 'in some weird and very approximate way, it was like a run in the matrix. Get wasted enough...and all about you the dance of biz, information interacting, data made flesh in the mazes of the black market" (41). For Case, "drugs cannot duplicate the disembodiment of cyberspace, which is the freedom he craves; and the encumbrance of "the meat," and his "case" of flesh, leaves him only with his self-loathing. Death is the last remaining escape hatch" (41-42). Grant argues that Case's "feelings threaten to anchor him to this life, to prevent his achievement of *ekstasis* (as the Greeks called "the flight of the soul from the body)" (42). Grant is on the right track here, but his statement is only part of the picture. Case's feelings for his ex-girlfriend, Linda Lee, not only threaten to anchor him to life, they ultimately threaten to flatline his body and hold his consciousness hostage in the matrix.

Case is one of many damaged characters that populate Gibson's novel; it is what Case does with this trauma that makes him unique. There is no reprieve from the anxiety and hopelessness he feels, no naturalistic vista to give him solace. There is a great sense of loss in Case, a loss of innocence and a loss of memory. His childhood is compared to the pollution that comes with corporate manufacturing, "Case watched the sun rise on the landscape of childhood, on broken slag and the rusting shells of refineries" (85). Even the old forms of art have fallen into a state of decay or been commoditized. When Case visits an importer and exporter named Julius Deane we're shown "a Dali clock hung on the wall between the bookcases, its distorted

face sagging to the bare concrete floor. Its hands were holograms that altered the convolutions of the face as they rotated, but it never told the correct time" (12). This surrealist melted clock represents Gibson's characters' trouble with time and memory. Their psyches are constantly threatened by the trauma of living in this volatile, violent, and cultureless world. Most importantly, the Dali clock also illustrates the larger theme of commoditization of art in the novel. At one point Molly Millions; Case's partner puts "a booted foot up on the dust covered Kandinsky coffee table" (34). Wassily Kandinsky was a famous Russian artist responsible for some of the first abstract paintings. The fact that his genius is commoditized into a now dusty coffee table, and that Molly mindlessly puts her boots on it, illustrates how devalued art is in the Sprawl society. Both the Dali clock and the Kandinsky coffee table provide concrete examples of how the old forms of art have been absorbed into corporate culture. The sense of time and place original artwork provides is erased and replaced with mass market art built by machines, not people. It is not until Gibson's second novel, *Count Zero*, machine made art attains a certain status in the Sprawl, but even then a corporation threatens to violate it.

Grant argues, "there is a constant tension between these permanent traces, the "engrams" that shape one's being, and the desire to change that being, or to escape it. This seems to be an innate (programmed) drive in each of Gibson's characters, the drive to transcend the self" (42). Gibson's characters seem more interested in destroying the self than transcending it. They do not look for transcendental catharsis; they operate from one self-destructive quick fix to the next with an eye on ultimately escaping this mortal coil. Grant asks, "How does one transcend one's human limitations? Through religion? Meditation? Community action? These have been ruled out, apparently, by the nature of Gibson's, which is too fast, brutal, and fragmented for these methods. In Gibson's world, the preferred method of transcendence is though technology" (43). I

think technology alone is not a sufficient method of transcendence for Gibson's characters. It is very much what these characters bring with them to cyberspace that allows for a transcendental journey. Case's ultimate realization of self happens when he acknowledges his genuine feelings for Linda Lee, not when he obtains new technology. I will delve into Case's relationship with Linda later.

In *Terminal Identity,* a comprehensive analysis of human identity in contemporary science fiction, Scott Bukatman argues "the paraspatial vertigo of Gibson's cyberspace...manifest(s) a confrontation with the end of meaning...effect(ing) a critique of fully technologized instrumental reason–from a position *within*, rather than opposed to, the seductive, commercial surfaces of contemporary mass culture" (245). That is to say that Gibson's cyberspace provides his characters a chance to confront meaninglessness; allowing for a critique of a commoditized culture from inside one of its corporate constructs. I agree with Bukatman on this point and I think this corporate toolkit allows Case to follow his self-destructive impulse until he finds true meaning. Case is driven by a lack of purpose only to find catharsis through his artistic hacking. Bukatman states "*Neuromancer* reencodes capitalist space as an erotic space, a space defined by the flow of desire and the circumvention of instrumental, capitalist space" (310). I would take this one step further and argue that *Neuromancer* reencodes the capitalist space of the matrix as an artistic space. Artist hackers such as Case repurpose and weaponize the capitalist space against itself, calling the entire system into question.

In *The Artificial Paradise,* Sharona Ben-Tov argues, "alienated nature appears in full dress. The Cartesian mind-body dualism is enforced; the "Fall" reminds us that cyberspace is indeed an American paradise machine, a technological heterocosm replacing fallen nature with an artificial American Eden. Cyberpunk adds its market-wise twist: the body isn't only mere

natural matter, the diametric opposite of human identity; it's also a consumer commodity. In *Neuromancer's* world the body, eroticism, and generativity are the sites of alienated nature" (179). I strongly agree that Gibson's characters are intensely isolated and cut off from one another and have suffered a traumatic separation of mind and body. Cyberspace allows Gibson's characters to connect with something larger than the self, providing them a corporate canvas to explore their unattainable desires and human needs. Both Bukatman and Ben-Tov focus on the erotic possibilities in cyberspace, but I think it goes deeper than fetish, and deeper than sex. Gibson's characters are craving meaningful human bonds, and while eroticism is part of that, it is not the whole picture. Case is drawn to cyberspace because it provides him a vehicle to escape from mechanized society, his memories, and his body. Yet cyberspace ultimately allows Case to rediscover love; love for himself, and love for other humans. Case is a virtual artist who at once uses his medium to flirt with self-destruction (much like punk music), and to journey into his own psyche and manifest meaningful memories. Cyberspace is not Eden for Case; it is Genesis.

Grant argues this repurposing of the system is detournement: "the Surrealists called this detournement. It was picked up later by the Situationists, by the punk movement, and in the 1980s by hip-hop music and cyberpunk SF. It's a method of jumping out of the system: to turn a product of that system against itself" (43). This argument can be applied to Gibson and to Case. Gibson reappropriates stylistic tropes from science fiction, crime fiction, modern art, video games, and avant-garde music such as the Velvet Underground, to create a pastiche. Gibson's use of detournement draws attention to *Neuromancer's* influences while forging new ground and making new connections amongst artists and readers. Case uses the corporate matrix of cyberspace to create artful hacks that deconstruct the system, grant AI transcendental godlike

powers of creation, and break into his own memory banks and unearth feelings of love in the flesh.

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr has written extensively on Gibson. Csicsery-Ronay planned to write a three-part essay, one for each novel in the Sprawl Trilogy. Alas, he only completed two, "The Sentimental Futurist: Cybernetics and Art in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*" and "Antimancer: Cybernetics and Art in Gibson's *Count Zero*." His first essay raises some crucial questions about art, but his argument is derailed when he applies Italian Futurism to his reading of *Neuromancer*. This decision works against some of the important points he raises. I firmly agree with Csicsery-Ronay's statement "Gibson's fiction returns...to the question of how artists can represent the human condition in a social world saturated by cybernetic technologies" (221). Case lives in Chiba City, part of a vast network of physical cities that sprawl up the eastern seaboard of the United States. Corporations selling virtual and prosthetic commodities saturate the neon landscape. Almost every character has some kind of computer implant, robotic appendage, or cybernetic enhancement. Because of these prostheses, Csicsery-Ronay believes that "almost every character in *Neuromancer* is an artist of some kind, almost every object a technological artifact that is also a work of art. More important, because *Neuromancer* depicts a social sphere running at breakneck speed, unmoored from the meat-bodies' natural gravity, the ruling artifacts are kinetic, theatrical, dancelike" (227). Csicsery-Ronay is correct about the ubiquitous nature of art in the Sprawl, but one must look at what value this art provides to our main characters to understand Gibson's cautionary text. I argue that Case, Marie-France Tessier-Ashpool, and the Neuromancer Artificial Intelligence are the only artists who create meaningful art. In order to identify the meaningful art in the novel, we must first examine some of the other works of art present.

Csicsery-Ronay concludes the art present in *Neuromancer* is "barely distinguishable from publicity, from the commodification and marketing of experience" (224). The reason why it is "barely distinguishable from publicity…" is because it is publicity. These commoditized corporate experiences mimic the old forms of art but retain none of their meaning. To place importance and treat corporate art as a technological totem puts one at risk of misreading William Gibson's novel is a celebration of technological advancement. *Neuromancer* is not celebration of technology, it is a warning aimed at artists and society as a whole.

Csicsery-Ronay argues, "art is all there is. Cybernetic technology has transformed the world into a perpetually mutating artifactual system" (226). and that "Gibson insists that we conceive *Neuromancer's* world as an art world" (227). While Gibson does presents reader with copious forms of media and art, Gibson insists we conceive this "art world" as being completely devoid of substance. The virulent growth of capitalism and technological advances have overwhelmed humanity and forced artfulness into a repressed dormant state. Old art forms are no longer of value and society is too distracted with cyberspace and body modifications to realize how poor a substitute corporate media is for art. Before the technological explosion that followed a world war event, old forms of art allowed humans to reflect, think, challenge the status quo, and most importantly allowed people to transcend language and empathize with one another. After the war, a cancerous growth of multinational corporation spread and inundated society with an endless array of media, enhancements, and computer technology. The society of the Sprawl became emotionally numb due to the inundation with neon products offering a false sense of purpose, and the cheap thrill of escapism.

Media saturates *Neuromancer's* narrative, but meaningful art proves much more elusive. I agree with Tom Henthorne of, *William Gibson: A Literary Companion* when he writes that

Gibson is "generally regarded as writer primarily concerned with the impact new technologies

have on the individual and society, Gibson frequently addresses the effects technology has on art,

considering not only existing media but imagining new forms…" (23). The role of artists and art

is amongst the core themes of Gibson's fiction. *Neuromancer* can be read as Gibson's

rumination of art and artists in a world of ever evolving technological products. Gibson was

inspired to write *Neuromancer* when he was walking past a video game arcade:

> I was looking into one of those video arcades. I could see in the physical intensity of their
> postures how rapt the kids inside were. It was one of those closed systems out of a
> Pynchon novel. A feedback loop with photons coming off the screen into the kid's eyes,
> neurons moving through their bodies and electrons moving through the video game.
> These kids clearly *believed* in the space games projected. Everyone I know who works
> with computers seems to develop a belief that there's some kind of *actual space* behind
> the screen, someplace you can't see but you know is there (33).

Gibson explores the role of art when new technologies provide us with the means to erase

our bodies from an interactive experience. If one of the simplest concepts of traditional art is the

creation of a product or emotion created by a human being, a technology like cyberspace that

numbs our emotions and erases the body can be viewed as a direct affront to classic art.

One of these new forms of media is called simstim, or simulation stimulation. The viewer "plugs

in" to a full sensory and doctored recording of a simstim star's feed. A simstim star is the

equivalent of a reality TV persona whose sensory experiences are recorded from a first person

perspective. The simstim star's feed records all senses by pulling data directly from the talent's

brain. The experience is presented from first person perspective and the viewer is a passive

participant in the show.

Henthorne argues that "Gibson makes it clear that simstim is an artistic medium...in

contrast to what Gibson terms "meat puppets," people who are passive while their bodies are

being exploited by others in what amounts to a hi-tech version prostitution, simstim artists are

active, orchestrating their output to achieve certain effects" (23). Henthorne comes to incorrect conclusion here. Simstim stars are not in contrast to Gibson's "meat puppets," they represent a direct correlation to these passive prostitutes who rent their bodies for capital. Simstim actors are mentally penetrated by millions of people. Not only is their body physically penetrated with broadcast technology, their very minds are laid bare and violated. While simstim stars don't have physical intercourse, wearing someone else's body is a sensual freeing experience. At best, simstim stars are technologically advanced forms of reality television or porn stars. Speaking about simstim, Henthorne states "art emerges as an important subject in much of his work as Gibson explores its social and ideological functions, suggesting that it does not simply convey meanings, but rather affords us opportunities to make meanings for ourselves. To Gibson, art is essentially a collaborative process in which the consumer is as important as the creator, creating for her or himself the meaning that is needed" (23). There is very little textual evidence to support the claim that simstim affords Gibson's characters to make meanings for themselves.

We need look no further than Gibson's own text in *Neuromancer* to refute Henthorne's claim that simstim is art and simstim stars are artists: "Cowboys didn't get into simstim, he thought, because it was basically a meat toy. He knew that the trodes he used and the little plastic tiara dangling from the simstim deck were basically the same, and that the cyberspace matrix was actually a drastic simplification of the human sensorium, at least in terms of presentation, but simstim itself struck him as a gratuitous multiplication of flesh input. The commercial stuff was edited, of course, so that if Tally Isham got a headache in the course of a segment, you didn't feel it" (55). Gibson's comparison between simstim and hacking is telling. The two mediums have certain technological attributes in common, but that is where their similarities end. Hackers like Case view simstim as a "meat toy," something that manipulates and enhances

the body's sensory input. What's worse, the viewer's body is being by manipulated and directly marketed to by multinational corporations. In our current corporate society, Simstim would be the product of a marriage between Facebook, Virtual Reality, and Reality TV. It is Case's shunning of this corporate tampering. his repurposing of his Ono-Sendai cyberspace deck, and his literal shedding of the skin that allows him to create art in the matrix. Ironically Case's journey leads him back to the "meat" he hoped to escape. Case's art does not lead him to transcendental, non-physical catharsis; it leads him back to his body and back to humanity. In a world where people escape their bodies daily, true transcendence comes from returning to the flesh.

There is another character that can be seen as a doppelganger to Case; that character's name is Peter Riviera; and he deals in illusions. Peter Riviera is the only character who physically stands on a traditional stage in front of an actual audience in the novel. There are various scenes in *Neuromancer* where Riviera conjures three-dimensional illusions in the real world, usually for his own amusement. While Riviera partakes in intravenous drug use "Case watched the snake, which was finger thick and banded black and scarlet, slowly contract tightening around Riviera's arm...the scorpion swayed its brownish claws and scurried up his arm, its feet tracking the faint dark telltale of veins " (106-107). Case asks Riviera if he "always makes it into a little show?" (107). Riviera's illusions reach a pinnacle when he performs his grandest show, *The Doll* at Le Restaurant Vingtieme Siecle. Riviera dedicates his performance to Lady 3Jane and Molly Millions. The restaurant goes pitch dark, creating a black canvas and "lines of faint light began to form, verticals and horizontals, sketching an open cube around the stage...Riviera seemed to quiver with concentration....Suddenly the ghostly cube was filled, had become a room, a room lacking a fourth wall, allowing the audience to view its contents" (138).

Riviera's manifestation takes the form of a play, mirroring both old art forms and the ethereal nature of cyberspace. At this moment his creation certainly appears to be meaningful art that mirrors old forms of theater and sculpture. Then after some brief narration "a women's hand lay on the mattress...Riviera...began to stroke it gently....The act progressed with a surreal internal logic of its own. The arms were next. Feet. Legs....Riviera was in the bed now, naked....Then the torso formed, as Riviera caressed it into being, white headless perfect....Molly's body...Riviera and the limbless torso writhed together on the bed....Now the limbs and torso had merged....The head was there, the image complete. Molly's face, with smooth quicksilver drowning her eyes. Riviera and the Molly image began to couple with a renewed intensity....Riviera puts the dreamgirl together, the dreamgirl takes him apart....Cheers from the audience, applause" (140-141).

This holographic cabaret certainly appears to be art. His holograms are made by hand, are aesthetically pleasing, and elicit a strong reaction from an audience. Then why is *The Doll* not a work of art? Gibson states that "all the stuff that he (Riviera) does-the little projected hallucinations and things-are relatively low tech. He's just projecting holograms. There's this amazing German surrealist sculptor named Hans Belmer who made a piece called *The Doll*. He made a doll that was more his fetish object than a work of art, this totally idealized girl-child that could be taken apart and rearranged in an infinite number of ways. So I have Riviera call his piece *The Doll*. Belmer's doll. Riviera also represents the fragmentation of the body" (52). Gibson gives Riviera a full-length performance for two reasons. Firstly, it shows the reader how art has been stripped of meaning and reduced to schlock. It is pure fetishized spectacle filled with gore, narcissism, and the objectification of the female body. Secondly, and most importantly

Molly's reaction to and explanation of Riviera's performance illustrates why his performance art offers no positive benefits beyond entertainment and escapism.

After Riviera's performance Molly is hiding in a brothel that houses meat puppet prostitutes. Molly says, "if I'd stayed, I might have killed Riviera….What he did to me. The show….You know how I got the money when I was starting out? Here. Not here, but a place like it, in the Sprawl….So Riviera hit a nerve last night...I guess it (Wintermute) wants me to hate him real bad" (147-149). Riviera did not create a meaningful work of art with his illusions. He conjured an illusion focused on objectifying, humiliating, and ultimately enraging Molly. What is more, Molly suggests Riviera was directed to create this illusion by the Artificial Intelligence that sets our characters into motion.

As previously stated Csicsery-Ronay believes "almost every character in *Neuromancer* is an artist of some kind, almost every object a technological artifact that is also a work of art" (227). By analyzing Peter Riviera we begin that even though this statement is true, there are varying degrees of artfulness. There is no room in the physical world for classic forms of art any longer. Only illusion, exploitation, and cheap thrills remain. Csicsery-Ronay does regard a hierarchy of art in the Sprawl. He states "in the aesthetic profusion three grand-scale works of art dominate all the others: Marie-France Tessier-Ashpool's Artificial Intelligences, Wintermute's plot, and Case's visionary ballet of mecanique with Black Ice" (227). I disagree that the AI's plotting is art. AI does eventually become an artist, but not until Gibson's second novel *Count Zero*. I do agree with Csicsery-Ronay's assessment that Marie-France and Case are artists, but their impetus for creating their finest works vary greatly; as do their fates.

The Tessier-Ashpool family, who run a multinational corporation, commissioned an artificial intelligence to be created and housed in a rather ornate fashion. Jimmy, a fence of stolen

goods; tries to sell the ornate bust to his contact Smith. "The most unusual thing Jimmy had managed to score though the archipelago was a head, an intricately worked bust, cloisonné over platinum, studded with seedpearls and lapis. Smith sighing, had put down his pocket microscope and advised Jimmy to melt the thing down. It was contemporary, not antique, and had no value to the collector. Jimmy laughed. The thing was a computer terminal, he said. It could talk. And not in a synth-voice, but with a beautiful arrangement of gears and miniature organ pipes. It was a baroque thing for anyone to have constructed" (74). It is easy to see why some consider this bust a work of art. The bust was constructed through "an unlikely collaboration between two Zurich artisans, an enamel specialist in Paris, a Dutch jeweler, and a California chip designer. It had been commissioned...by Tessier-Ashpool S.A..." (74). It is even referred to as "artwork" (75) by a vat-grown cloned assassin. A closer examination of the text reveals that the ornate bust is an ornate skin for a computer terminal, much like a bejeweled iPhone case. While the bust is aesthetically pleasing and might have elicited an emotional response in a different time period, it holds no value to the Sprawl society. Smith, the closest thing the Sprawl has to an art collector, tells Jimmy to "melt the thing down": it will never have value as a work of art, because physical art is no longer of value in the Sprawl. The art dealer is completely unaware of the true technological and perhaps transcendental power of the head because he refuses to examine it closely.

The "dance of biz" is too erratic to focus on the actual meaning of an object, even when the truth is hidden right below the surface. This ornate terminal was designed to accept a code word that will allow the two Artificial Intelligences the Tessier-Ashpools' designed to merge and attain deified status. The bust ultimately provides Case an outlet for his transcendental emotional release. "As to what the word is, well, I never considered it to be a word, really, though 3Jane,

teasingly, calls it one. It is in fact three "notes", something akin to birdcall. The key to the cipher, that is, is revealed as being purely tonal, musical, rather than linguistic. Case's "cry", a species of primal scream, the voicing of the emotionality he's been walled off from throughout the narrative (and his life), torn finally from the core of his being, is what actually forces 3Jane to give up the key. Call and response, of some kind. Hearing him, she can't help herself. When she taunts him ("Take your word, thief.") she's in fact daring him, and assuming he can't -- just as she was, a moment before, daring Molly to kill her. "

Csicsery-Ronay believes that these AI are artworks in and of themselves. There is very little substantive text in *Neuromancer* that supports this claim. Csicsery-Ronay wrongly concludes that Wintermute's manipulation and plotting of Case, Molly, Riviera, and Armitage are art. He likens their actions to that of an actor on a stage. He thinks the AI has given "them a stage on which to have the best performance of their lives" (228). Rather, Wintermute has taken away their free will and thus their humanity. The AI has turned these human beings into lines of code to be executed at will. Csicsery-Ronay writes, "the irony is that their arts have become parts of Wintermute's operational programing" (228). This statement is purely conjecture and does not hold up to scrutiny. The characters seemingly fated actions are not scripted art. They are not actors in the play of life. They are traumatized characters unknowingly being reduced to automatons by a near godlike Artificial Intelligence. Case's art in cyberspace provides agency and allows him to break the cycle of automatization.

While I think Csicsery-Ronay is off base with his conclusions, he correctly identifies the importance of art in *Neuromancer*. The two Artificial Intelligences may not be art, but their inevitable union creates a super sentient being capable of becoming an artist. Dixie Flatline, a hacker who recently passed away and his consciousness saved as ROM and uploaded into

cyberspace explains his human responses to Case; "I ain't likely to right you no poem, if you follow me. Your AI, it just might. But it ain't no way *human*" (131).

Dixie hints at the possibility of Artificial Intelligences creating art. Of the two AI, only one can be argued as having the ability to create art. These AI represent two halves of one brain. The AI named Wintermute represents the left hemisphere and is capable of the plotting and scheming that Csicsery-Ronay mislabels as art. Wintermute manipulates humans with mathematical certainty. This AI is effective, but is not complete. Case's contact Deane explains this when he says, "let's say you're dealing with a small part of a man's left brain. Difficult to say if you're dealing with the man at all, in a case like that" (120). It is not an accident that Gibson chooses to define Wintermute as the left hemisphere. The left side of the brain is supposedly responsible for logic, science, and mathematics. Wintermute even refers to the Neuromancer AI as another half of his brain when he says "my, ah, other lobe is onto us, it looks like" (173). Wintermute is identified as being a master plotter incapable of creating art, when Case tries to dissuade the Founders of Zion from deifying the AI because of the Dub music they think it creates. Case says, "Listen….that's an AI, you know? Artificial Intelligence. The music it played you, it probably just tapped your banks and cooked up whatever it thought you'd like…" (110). This suggests that Wintermute has the ability to mimic artistry, but not create art from using its imagination or inherent creativity.

Wintermute relies on Case's memory to create three-dimensional representations of formative locations from Case's past inside cyberspace. Case is curious about the construct the AI has built. Wintermute (appearing as the Finn) explains "this is a memory, right? I tap you, sort it out, and feed it back in" (170). Case responds in disbelief, he doesn't think he has a good enough memory to create something so detailed. Wintermute responds, "Everyone does...but not

many of you can access it. Artists can, mostly, if they're any good" (170) Initially it might seem like Wintermute is referring to himself as an artist, when in fact he is describing the methods used by human artists. Wintermute goes on to say, "the holographic paradigm is the closest thing you've worked out to a representation of human memory" (170). Here the AI is suggesting the three-dimensional holograms created in cyberspace represent the progression of artistic mediums designed to communicate human memories. Wintermute goes on to say "but you've never done anything about it. People, I mean….Maybe if you had, I wouldn't be happening" (170). Wintermute suggests if humans used technology to master new forms of art using holograms, he would not have been created. Instead, humanity focused on rapid technological growth fueled by capitalism. This resulted in an isolated society segmented by the very technology meant to enhance communication. Humans became isolated and their minds and bodies suffered a disconnect. Humanity's emotionality is locked inside the meat and their ability to form meaningful relationships through physicality and communication is destroyed. Humans become reliant on Artificial Intelligence to move them forward as a species and open new lines of communication (ultimately with AI from Alpha Centauri).

Wintermute's three-dimensional cyberspace holograms are not art, but plagiarized memories designed to manipulate human players to achieve his goal of becoming a godhead. It is understandable why Csicsery-Ronay believes Wintermute's meticulous plotting and his creation of Armitage using the shattered pieces of Corto's psyche is art. After all, Wintermute's holographic jump cuts and "creation" of Armitage appear as the manifestation of Burroughs' cut-up technique. Wintermute literally cuts and pastes segments of Corto's mind and assembles them into Armitage, "Wintermute had built Armitage up from scratch, with Corto's memories...as the

foundation" (202). Corto has been deconstructed and dehumanized. Wintermute can alter his brain like a piece of film, "...Armitage had been a sort of edited version of Corto...."(202).

This passage certainly makes Wintermute sound like an artist, or at the very least a film editor. Yet, I still don't believe Gibson intends Wintermute to be considered an artist. Art is on Gibson's mind, but the reader is not to infer that Armitage is an assemblage or work of cut-up. Grant states, "He casts his net wide, drawing from every branch of the cultural stream. His books and stories are riddled with references to: paintings, sculptures, and architecture...Gibson doesn't merely use literary detournement to seem hip and postmodern, but as part of his thematic framework of transcendent recycling (44)." Gibson uses this swirling pastiche of art references, techniques, vocabulary, and allusions to create his own art by recycling old forms. In this art saturated narrative it is easy to mistake simstim, holographic cabarets, ornate computer terminals, Artificial Intelligences and edited human sculptures as art, but the claim does not hold up to close scrutiny.

The one caveat to this conclusion is the AI named Neuromancer. The "other lobe," (173) as Wintermute refers to it. Neuromancer represents the right hemisphere of the brain. The right hemisphere of the brain is responsible for creativity and the arts. The Neuromancer AI is capable of seeing beauty in a way Wintermute and this transhuman culture is not. Neuromancer chooses Riviera's eyes when creating a cyberspace avatar, "they are beautiful to me...I need no mask to speak with you. Unlike my brother. I create my own personality. Personality is my medium" (259). Neuromancer does not wear the skin of Case's memories in order to elicit a reaction. He creates new holographic forms using his own imagination and aesthetic preferences. At one moment in the narrative Case is stranded on a virtual beach in cyberspace and he says "dunno

whose memories you're using for this one" (237). Neuromancer also has the ability and desire to create virtual spaces that are not reliant on the user's memory.

As previously stated, Csicsery-Ronay believes there are three major works of art in *Neuromancer*. We have discussed and dismissed the first two; now we must explore Case and what Csicsery-Ronay calls his "visionary ballet of mecanique with Black Ice" (227). While I do not agree that Case's art should be described as a mechanical ballet, it certainly is visionary. Henry Dorsett Case is one of the only human artists in *Neuromancer* that creates meaningful art aimed at created change as opposed to perpetuating what Csicsery-Ronay calls the "mutating artifactual system." Case uses his deck and cyberspace rig to access the matrix. When Case jacks in, his sensorium is transported to a three dimensional representation of cyberspace. This prospect is certainly one that many video gamers (including myself) dream of. Yet, even though Gibson was inspired by video arcades to create his groundbreaking representation of the cyberspace, he is not arguing for the relevance of video games. Gibson is showing the reader how necessary and resilient art is, even when corporate technologies threaten to commoditize it completely. Sharona Ben-Tov believes Gibson's matrix is exciting to the reader because "the notion that cyberspace's artificial sensations will have real effects. The cyberspace "cowboy" who interfaces with a computer via mental graphic displays, whose senses tell him that he's flying a warplane over a cityscape of bright golden towers, will actually be raiding the computerized files of a utility company or disabling the computerized alarm system of a bank" (177).

Ben-Tov is correct to draw the parallel to male power fantasies and escapist entertainment. After all, this construct is at the heart of contemporary video game and movie culture and at the heart the Sprawl's society. Yet, by minimizing the importance of the

holographic representations in cyberspace as a purely juvenile method escape, Ben-Tov misses

Neuromancer's key themes and the importance and relevance of Case. Ben-Tov goes on to say

"the cowboy's adventures are the high-tech equivalent of a legal thriller: they smell of the office.

They are a disguise for time spent hacking at a terminal. Of course, legitimate systems experts as

well as software—toting criminals may find computerized exploits exhilarating, but they hardly

need cyberspace. On the other hand, ordinary people whose lives are enmeshed with computers,

and whose normal interactions with the machines are alienating and boring, but extremely

important, are more likely to enjoy the fantasy of controlling these powerful devices by playing

mental video games. Faced with your tax return, wouldn't you rather complete it by dive-

bombing across a field of glitzy colored lights?" (177). Case's time spent as a console cowboy is

much more than a disguise for hacking a terminal. It is important to note that the concept of

cyberspace was almost completely new during the writing of *Neuromancer*. The kinetic visual

hook of the matrix Gibson utilizes is certainly designed to keep the reader's attention. Ben-Tov's

assertion would be correct if it was directed toward a generic console cowboy, but Case and his

navigation and restructuring of cyberspace is much more meaningful than a male power fantasy

to control devices by playing mental video games. Case is making art and his art is focused on

societal change, not simple escapism for himself or the reader. Initially Case's art takes the form

of a manifest death wish, but ultimately Case opens up and frees the emotionality that was

repressed by the Sprawl's corporate attack on authenticity.

During *Neuromancer's* first chapter Case is referred to an artist three times by the

bartender Ratz:

"You are too much the artiste, Herr Case." (2)

"You are the artiste of the slightly funny deal." (2)

"Now, some night, you get maybe too artistic; you wind up in the clinic tanks, spare

parts." (5)

At this point in the narrative it is not clear what Case's medium is or why Ratz refers to him as

an "artiste." As previously stated, traditional art forms have been devalued in the Sprawl.

Corporations have commoditized traditional forms of art and turned it into mass media. What is

evident that whatever Case's art is, it is potentially fatal. True art has gone underground and has

become almost analogous with crime. Case lives in an area "where art wasn't quite crime, crime

not quite art" (44). Case's art is his virtuosic talent at hacking in cyberspace for a definitive

outcome aimed at a massive audience.

In his recent TED talk, Evan Roth stated, "professionally I'm an artist but I also consider

myself a hacker" (0.15). Roth uses his art to hack everyday life. He does not strap on a VR rig

like Case, he uses impromptu sculpture or graffiti. Roth states, "when I am inspired by and

falling in love with great graffiti it's not about how well rendered the paint is, it's not about how

many colors are in it. It has everything to do with where those letters are placed and what

systems it's are hacking into" (4.15). I see a direct analogue to Case and his hacks in the matrix.

Case isn't concerned with what colors emit from hacks or how many pixels it contains. He is

entranced by what systems he is hacking into and what the potential outcome of that hack is.

As previously mentioned, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. has done some very important work

identifying the importance of art in *Neuromancer*. His analysis has spread across countless

pieces of scholarship pertaining to Gibson, but this analysis is often taken at face value. When

one pulls the thread at Csicsery-Ronay's central argument if begins to unravel. In the

introduction to Csicsery-Ronay's "The Sentimental Futurist: Cybernetics and Art in William

Gibson's *Neuromancer*," he recognizes that "Gibson's fiction returns, as to a tonic, to the

question of how artists can represent the human condition in a social world saturated by cybernetic technologies" (221). Csicsery-Ronay correctly identifies one of the central themes in most all of Gibson's work, the role of the artists in society and how the artists must adapt to advances in technology and globalization. Csicsery-Ronay thinks, "this is not primarily a political and ethical question but a question about the possibilities and meaning of art in a world that has absorbed and usurped the traditional purposes and scenes of art" (222). Csicsery-Ronay answers the question of how artists adapt by creating the concept of "Sentimental Futurism" to define Gibson and the artists in *Neuromancer*. Csicsery-Ronay argues a direct correlation between cyberpunk and Italian Futurism. This forced correlation is detrimental to understanding Gibson's reason for tackling the concept of art and artistry in *Neuromancer*. Csicsery-Ronay argues, "that Gibson attempted to solve the problem in *Neuromancer* through a form of sentimental futurism. He adopted the artistic and technosocial vision of a neofuturism, albeit 'sentimentally,' without celebrating the inexorable victory of autonomous technology" (221). The Guggenheim describes Futurism as being "inspired by the markers of modernity—the industrial city, machines, speed, and flight—Futurism's adherents exalted the new and the disruptive. They sought to revitalize what they determined to be a static, decaying culture and an impotent nation that looked to the past for its identity….Futurist artists experimented with the fragmentation of form, the collapsing of time and space, the depiction of dynamic motion, and dizzying perspectives (http://exhibitions.guggenheim.org/futurism/).

Case's traversal of cyberspace certainly appears to fit this description; "Case has the strange impression of being in the pilot's seat in a small plane. A flat dark surface in front of him suddenly glowed with a perfect reproduction of the keyboard at his deck….Headlong motion through walls of emerald green, milky jade, the sensation of speed beyond anything he'd known

before in cyberspace….The Tessier-Ashpool ice shattered…" (256) and "Case hit the representation of his deck, fingers flying automatically across the board. The Kuang swerved sickeningly, then reversed whipping itself backward, shattering the illusion of a physical vehicle" (257). The parallels to Futurism are apparent, but not intended by Gibson. Futurism, sentimental or otherwise, offers no solution to the role of the artist and art Gibson's world. Rather, "Sentimental Futurism" celebrates the very technology responsible for perpetuating the mind/body segmentation of Gibson's characters. Csicsery-Ronay misreads Burroughs cut-up techniques and video game's influence on William Gibson as Futurism. The mash up of these two concepts is what leads to the high-speed movement and abrupt scene changes during Case's hacking of the Black Ice (Intrusion Countermeasure Electronics).

Csicsery-Ronay is on point however when surmises Gibson's "tendency has been to look for the solution in the realistic depiction of experimental art–and to represent the notion, inherited from modernist avant-garde, of artwork's capacity to break down the political-ideological domination of the experience of reality" (225). This assertion hits closer to the mark than his idea of Sentimental Futurism. The realistic depictions of experiential art he refers to are Case's holographic art he creates by hacking in cyberspace. Gibson's characters, and especially Case are confronted with situations where they cannot tell the difference between reality, Virtual Reality, dreams, and drug induced hallucinations. In many ways Case's traversal of cyberspace can be read as the virtual manifestation of art and humanity's quest for meaning. Csicsery-Ronay argues, "Gibson and his protagonists embark….on quests to restore value and meaning. They have an advantage over the earlier inhabitants of modern fiction, in that the cybersphere promises that it may be possible artificially to construct transcendence. Because the cybersphere has already absorbed the affects and objects that in the past were associated with sacredness and

value, Gibson's protagonists have no choice but to try out artificial transcendence" (226). Case does not initially seek transcendence, artificial or otherwise. Case's quest is one aimed at self-destruction and societal crisis. The quest does not conclude how he expected though. It is true Case is offered transcendence from his body by the Neuromancer AI, but this offer (Case could not have predicted) held no bearing on the choices Case made to arrive at this precipice. This artificial transcendence parallels the death wish Case has carried since the first chapter but was not part of his drive. The transcendental offer is incredibly seductive to someone with Case's rationale. He is given the opportunity to flatline and have his consciousness is uploaded as RAM to cyberspace to live with Linda Lee's consciousness. I will explore this plot point later in the chapter.

Sandor Klapcsick in one of the many scholars who agrees with Csicsery-Ronay. In his piece "Cannibalizing 'Ancient' Technologies and Art Forms: William Gibson's Utilization of Avant-Garde and Art Deco" Klapcsick states "Istvan Csicsery-Ronay describes the artistic and technological visions of *Neuromancer* (1984) as "sentimental futurism" ("The Sentimental" 221), and the impact of Futurism on Gibson's early novels is tangible and hardly surprising" (32). Csicsery-Ronay's assertion should be surprising. Even though Klapcsick takes Csicsery-Ronay at face value, he does some important scholarship on Gibson's use of art. He pays respect to Csicsery-Ronay while advancing his own concepts. Klapcsick's "reading underlines that even though the influence of Futurism in Gibson's oeuvre is the most tangible in *Neuromancer*, several allusions, in addition to its synesthetic visions of Surrealism, relate the novel to other avant-garde movements" (33). Klapcsick's argues Case's navigation of cyberspace during his hacks echo Surrealism. He interestingly includes the idea of synesthesia into his argument to describe the moments when Case's senses get confused and his tastes a color. This happens

when "Case's sensory input warped with their velocity. His mouth filled with the aching taste of blue. His eyes were eggs of unstable crystal, vibrating with a frequency whose name was rain and the sound of trains, suddenly sprouting a humming forest of hair-fine glass spines. The spines split, bisected, split again, exponential growth under the dome of the Tessier-Ashpool ice. The roof of his mouth cleaved painlessly, admitting rootlets that whipped around his tongue, hungry for the taste of blue, to feed the crystal forest of his eyes, forests that pressed against the green dome, pressed and were hindered, and spread, growing down, filling the universe of the T-A..." (257-258). Gibson's prose invokes a digital surrealist landscape where our main character, Case, is in the thralls of creation. His virtual body becomes a piece of an evolving surrealist sculpture that is part of an ever-changing abstract landscape when he navigates cyberspace and hacks the Ice.

Csicsery-Ronay's "Sentimental Futurism" does not provide answers to Gibson's question about the role of the artists in a technologically saturated world, but the Sprawl's mutation of Surrealism might. The Harvard Art Museums identify of artists of Surrealism as

> "traumatized by the irrationality and bestiality of World War I….surrealist...artists rejected traditional codes of conduct as repressive….Tapping into alternative states of consciousness, including dreams and trances, they sought to liberate the imagination through what they termed psychic 'automatism,' a stream-of-consciousness method of painting or writing….The political turmoil of the 1930s accelerated the dispersal of surrealism across Europe and beyond as artists sought asylum from the spread of war and fascism. Some employed chance to destabilize artistic agency. Others examined, extended, or critiqued the commodification and objectification of the human body...by using mannequins, dolls, or machines in their work. (Harvard Art Museums Gallery Text).

The parallels to Case's authentic art in cyberspace are palpable. Case lives in a society traumatized by a World War III event. Traditional forms of art have been commoditized and rejected by would be artists. Case uses cyberspace to tap into an alternative state of conscious,

confusing his dreams with his cyberspace trances. Case liberates his imagination by a stream of conscious method of hacking that taps directly into his subconscious. Case uses his surreal hacks to rebel against the commodification and objectification of the human body in corporate art such as Simstim.

I believe the answer to Gibson's question, about the role of the artist, resides in what Scott Bukatman calls "techno-surrealism" (298). Cyberspace has replaced the traditional canvas, and pixels have replaced ink and paint. Two-dimensional static art has transformed into a three dimensional corporate construct. The hacker's manipulation of this construct triggers psychedelic surrealist imagery that springs forth from the subconscious. When Case is hacking the Ice his "consciousness divided like beads of mercury, arcing above an endless beach the color of the dark silver clouds. His vision was spherical, as though a single retina lined the inner surface of a globe that contained all things, if all things could be counted….And here things could be counted each one" (258).

> On its most basic level, Case's holographic creations inside cyberspace can be viewed as hyper minimalist sculpture. Scott Bukatman (relaying the scholarship of Rosalind Krauss) states "in one level, minimalism continued what Rodin and Brancusi initiated by relocating the 'point of origin of the body's meaning' from 'its inner core to its surface:''[T]he sculpture of our own time continues this project of decentering….The abstractness of minimalism makes it less easy to recognize the human body in the these works and therefore less easy to project ourselves into the space of that sculpture with all of our settled prejudices left intact. Yet our bodies and our experience of our bodies continue to be the subject of this sculpture – even when a work is made of several hundred tons of earth" (225).

Bukatman raises this point in regards to art inside a virtual space. He astutely draws a correlation between the difficulty of visualizing human forms inside the sculpture and the difficulty visualizing human forms inside cyberspace. This new dimension of interpretation does not stop the sculpture from being about our bodies and our bodies' experiences. Bukatman goes on to say "even when the work is 'made of' millions of bytes or information within the banks of

a computer's memory, 'our bodies and our experience of our bodies continue to be the subject' of that work" (225). Bukatman believes that bytes of information can be used as an artist's medium to create hyper minimalist digital sculptures. Case's traversal and manipulation of cyberspace is art, even though his body dissolves once he plugs in. This dissolution of the body serves as an apt metaphor for the inhabitants of the Sprawl. The rapid growth of technological implants and Virtual Reality devices threaten to erase the body completely. In fact, in Gibson's final novel in the Sprawl trilogy, *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* Bobby Newmark intentionally transcends his body and transfers his consciousness into cyberspace. Bobby and Case's journey's share similarities but end in very different ways. Case chooses flesh, while Bobby chooses data. According to Bukatman "the crisis of the body is posed as a crisis of meaning and definition" (247).

Case's initial derogatory comments about the body being "meat" illustrate the crisis he feels about the self. In fact, at the start of the novel, Case is locked inside of his body and cannot access cyberspace. His nervous system has been mutilated and his body serves as a prison (or case) for his psyche. Bukatman continues, "As in performance art, the body becomes the site of exploration, a site in which the implications of postmodern dissolution are inscribed and hypostatized" (259-260). For Case, his virtual body, the manifestation of his consciousness allows him to reflect on his life and in what things he places true meaning, namely his flesh and meaningful human bonds. He has grown addicted to plugging in to cyberspace and experiences a void he fills with narcotics. When Case regains access to cyberspace this scene unfolds, the "disk beginning to rotate, faster, becoming a sphere of paler gray, Expanding – And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending into infinity. Inner eye opening to the stepped scarlet pyramid of the

Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority burning beyond the green cubes of Mitsubishi Bank of America, and high and very far away he saw the spiral arms of military systems, forever beyond his reach. And somewhere he was laughing, in a white-painted loft, distant fingers caressing his deck, tears of release streaking down his face" (52). The manic relief Case has to accessing cyberspace again illustrates how disconnected he is from true human emotion. This post war world has severely traumatized its inhabitants. The closest thing to human emotional relief Gibson's characters feel is when they are allowed to virtually escape the harshness of reality.

While Case's virtual artistic quest is deeply personal, the question of intended audience arises when examining Case's art. Much like graffiti, Case's colorful and dangerous hacks are aimed at a system; the viewer is a bystander, a bystander the artists hopes to influence into questioning the system and its authority. Case uses his medium as a vehicle for catharsis and creating meaningful human bonds, which is the complete opposite of his initial intentions. As previously mentioned Henthorne argues that art "does not simply convey meanings, but rather affords us opportunities to make meanings for ourselves. To Gibson, art is essentially a collaborative process in which the consumer is as important as the creator, creating for her or himself the meaning that is needed" (23). While I do not agree that simstim allows viewers to create meaning, Case's art could. Case's nihilistic holographic art does not convey meaning in and of itself, but it is designed to free an audience shackled to their simstim devices and allow them to rediscover their bodies and find their fading humanity.

Examining the trope of art in cyberspaces, Bukatman states "the productions of techno-surrealist art perhaps represent something more: by de-emphasizing the individual unconscious, and acknowledging the dynamism of our technological unconscious, the transcendental metabolisms of techno-surrealism might describe a trajectory for real change" (298). Bukatman's

use of the term techno-surrealism seems quite fitting for the art Case produces. Case's hallucinogenic virtual holograms certainly fit the moniker of being both technological and surreal. Yet it is Case's individual unconsciousness that fuels his passionate desire for meaningful change, both personally and societally. During the climax of the novel Case yells at the Neuromancer AI "give us the fucking code….If you don't, what'll change? What'll ever fucking change for you? You'll wind up like the old man. You'll tear it all down and start building again! You'll build the walls back, tighter and tighter….I got no idea what'll happen if Wintermute wins, but it'll *change* something!" (260). This passage does two things, it serves as wonderful foreshadowing the Cornell Boxes the fragmented AI constructs in Gibson's follow up, *Count Zero*, and most importantly it shows Case at his most volatile and human. Case has found meaning in the prospect of creating change. He has no inkling as to whether merging the AIs together will create a positive change or a crisis, but he knows a crisis is needed to free the dehumanized automatons consuming corporate art for false technological release.

Sharona Ben-Tov is partially correct when she states "Case is not arguing, as an earlier hero might have done, for technological progress. Instead, he is arguing for crisis, possibly even for catastrophe. But crisis and catastrophe are precisely what "the dance of biz," of technological corporate capitalism, requires" (182). Case is certainly arguing for a crisis of some sort. Yet, Case is not initiating this crisis as part of "the dance of biz," because "Case has always taken it for granted that the real bosses, the kingpins in a given industry, would be both more and less that *people*. He'd seen it in the men who'd crippled him in Memphis...and it allowed him to accept Armitage's flatness and lack of feeling. He'd always imagined it as a gradual and willing accommodation of the machine, the system, the parent organism" (203). A clear delineation is made between Case and the men he works for, Case is not working his way up a criminal ladder

by creating a crisis; he knows that outcome leads to dehumanization. Case's decision is a direct affront to technological corporate capitalism. He chooses to unhinge the world by allowing the merging of the two AI. The effects could be cataclysmic to capitalism and make "the dance of biz" irrelevant. Case realizes that the status quo of the Sprawl is toxic to the human psyche. This initially instills a death wish inside him, but eventually this death wish evolves into the basic human need of creating meaningful physical experiences with loved ones.

Klapcsick thinks, "in the dystopic wastelands of the 'Sprawl' stories, avant-garde art and (both old and new) technology provide essential means for the characters to survive and remain hip" (34). Remaining hip has nothing to do with the importance of art in *Neuromancer*. Case appears hip because of his devil may care attitude and his misplaced death wish. Case becomes a complete character once he rejects Neuromancer's offer of transcendence. In *Understanding William Gibson,* Alva Gerald Miller argues "Neuromancer offers Case the opportunity to embrace an immortal existence as data, but Case ultimately refuses as he follows the sound of Maelcum's ever-crescendoing dub music back to reality" (64). Miller continues "Case rejects transcendence and embraces physicality in order to rescue Molly from the clutches of Riviera and Lady 3Jane and to complete the run against Straylight" (65). Simply put, Case chooses the flesh, but why? The answer lays the memories of Linda Lee that surface during the creation of art in cyberspace. These memories would not have surfaced if corporate art such as simstim, or the cheap thrills of cyberspace were his medium. Case needed to hack the corporate art of cyberspace to reveal authentic emotion and memory.

Case first sees Linda "under bright ghosts burning through a blue haze of cigarette smoke, holograms of Wizard's Castle, Tank War Europa, the New York skyline... And now he remembered her that way, her face bathed in restless laser light, features reduced to a code: her

cheekbones flaring scarlet as Wizard's Castle burned, forehead drenched with azure when

Munich fell to the Tank War, mouth touched with hot gold as a gliding cursor struck sparks from

the wall of a skyscraper canyon" (8). Case interprets Linda's features as if she is already part of

the matrix. Case does not compare her to some classical example of beauty like the sun, or a

flower. Linda's "features are reduced to code" and reflect the video games in the arcade. Not

quite "it is the east, and Juliet is the sun." Case created meaningful bonds with Linda, and this

connection is a direct affront to his initial disgust of the human body. Case recalls, "her dark hair

was drawn back, held by a band of printed silk. The pattern might have represented

microcircuits, or a city map…..He remembered the smell of her skin in the overheated darkness

of a coffin near the port, her fingers locked across the small of his back. All the meat, he thought,

and all it wants" (9). First Case remembers her hair tie, which resembles microcircuits to him,

another symbol of his corporeal existence in cyberspace. Then Case feels uncomfortable when

remembers Linda's smell while they embrace closely in bed. Case is deeply conflicted about his

attraction to Linda and mildly disgusted by her body. He views these desires as an addiction of

the flesh, something he thinks he is above. Gibson's use of the word coffin here brings attention

to the humanity's fear of death and decay. To Case the body is a rotting cage that offers him little

or no agency.

The capitalist society of the Sprawl is to blame for promoting addictive segregating

technologies that cut humans physically and emotionally off from one another. Through

misusing the intended purpose of these technologies by hacking, Case has tapped into

humanity's now dormant talent for creating art. At every turn Case is greeted with an artistic

tableau in cyberspace, "the precis began with a long hold on a color still that Case at first

assumed was a collage of some kind, a boy's face snipped from another image and glued to a

photograph of a paint-scrawled wall" (58). Cyberspace leaves a waking imprint on Case during

his waking hours, "it was good ice. Wonderful ice. Its patterns burned while he lay with his arm

under Molly's shoulders, watching the red dawn through the steel grid of the skylight. Its

rainbow pixelmaze was the first thing he saw when he woke" (59). Case initially uses the matrix

as an escape from the physical reality and human bonds, but his past relationship begins to creep

out of his subconscious, "once he woke from a confused dream of Linda Lee, unable to recall

who she was or what she'd ever meant to him. When he did remember, he jacked in and worked

for nine straight hours" (59). Gibson draws a direct correlation between Case's now painful

memories of Linda and his escape to cyberspace.

By trying to forget Linda Lee, Case ultimately has to confront his feelings for her. This

confrontation is Case's personal crisis and an unintended consequence of his quest. Wintermute

apologies for manifesting as Linda in cyberspace when he says "oh, and I'm sorry about Linda,

in the arcade. I was hoping to speak through her, but I'm generating all this out of your

memories, and the emotional charge....Well, it's very tricky" (119). The AI acknowledges Case's

feelings for Linda long before Case does. Later, Wintermute manifests as Ratz and states "really,

my artiste, you amaze me....but I suppose that is the way of the artiste, no? You needed this

world built for you, this beach, this place. To die" (234). Wintermute is correct to identify Case's

initial death wish, but something changes when he is transported to the beach construct by

Neuromancer, "something he'd found and lost so many times. It belonged; he knew– he

remembered–as she pulled him down, to the meat, the flesh the cowboys mocked. It was a vast

thing, beyond knowing, a sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone, infinite intricacy

that only the body, in its strong blind way, could ever read" (239). This visage allows Case to

realize what he lost in Linda's death and he begins to understand the true meaning of human

connection. Case rejects Neuromancer's offer, validates the flesh, shortsightedly chooses Molly, and he decides to live and die a normal human life. Case's hacking and manipulation of cyberspace force him to face a holographic reincarnation of his memories of longing and pain. These memories reinstill Case's humanity, heal his psyche and allow him to fuse the AI and escape the beach construct and his addiction to cyberspace. A wrinkle surfaces in Case's choice when Neuromancer says, "You were wrong, Case. To live here is to live. There is no difference" (258). Neuromancer (and Gibson) is questioning the very nature of reality here, but Case is will not hear it.

Wintermute can only create personalities made out of ROM, or read only memory, in cyberspace. These personalities are an echo of a human and never grow or change (see Dixie Flatline). However, Neuromancer, the artistic side of the AI brain, has the ability to create consciousness out of RAM, or random access memory. The suggestion is that the Linda Lee, created from RAM, is a true representation of who she was in the real world. Her consciousness will learn and grow in an authentic way. Neuromancer offered Case the ability to transfer his consciousness to RAM and live an eternity with an ideal digital version of her. It is revealed at the end that "Wintermute was hive mind, decision maker, effecting change in the world outside. Neuromancer was personality. Neuromancer was immortality" (269). Ironically, it is the uncomfortable and tangible memory of Linda's body that forces Case to choose a finite corporeal existence.

During Case's final hack "he came in steep, fueled by self-loathing….And then–old alchemy of the brain and its vast pharmacy–his hate flowed into his hands...he attained a level of proficiency exceeding anything he'd known or imagined. Beyond ego, beyond personality, beyond awareness, he moved...evading his attackers with an ancient dance...in that second, by

the clarity and singleness of his wish to die" (262), but then he sees a "neon forest, rain sizzling across hot pavement. The smell of frying food. A girl's hands locked across the small of his back, in the sweating darkness of a portside coffin" (262). Case recalls painful memories of Linda Lee. These memories reveal the human extremes of love and hate to Case. He hates himself for how he treated Linda, but he no longer wants to die. Her loving memory pulls him from the brink.

Once the caper is complete Case attempts to form a meaningful bond with Molly, but it ultimately fails. Molly abruptly escapes one morning and leaves Case note devoid of human emotion or nuance,"HEY ITS OK BUT ITS TAKING THE EDGE OFF MY GAME...ITS THE WAY IM WIRED I GUESS, WATCH YOUR ASS OKAY? XXX MOLLY" (267). Case has gone through a metamorphosis and has gained access to his human emotionality while Molly still acts as a "wired" machine. Molly does not attain her catharsis until *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Case's journey severs his addiction to cyberspace and his quest for death: "he found work. He found a girl who called herself Michael. And one October night, punching himself past the scarlet tiers of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority, he saw three figures, tiny, impossible, who stood at the very edge of one of the vast steps of data. Small as they were, he could make out the boys grin, his pink gums, the glitter of the long gray eyes that had been Riviera's. Linda still wore his jacket; she waved, as he passed. But the third figure, close behind her, arm across her shoulders, was himself" (271). **Critics (who?)** have labeled this resolution a failure, but I believe any other ending would betray Case's arc and his quest as an artist. The ending heals Case's human psyche and allows a RAM copy of his consciousness to live forever with Linda Lee. Case is now split in two much like the Wintermute and Neuromancer AI. Corporeal Case lives a normal human existence and Cyberspace Case attains accidental transcendence and digital immortality.

The true art on display in *Neuromancer* is as ethereal as cyberspace itself. Gibson makes art much more tangible in his follow up *Count Zero*, but the artists are no longer human. Unable to heed Case's warning at the end of *Neuromancer,* the recently shattered AI creates complex dioramas that mirror the lives of the Tessier-Ashpools' and the artwork of Joseph Cornell, which I will explore in depth in the next chapter.

Chapter III

Diorama Gods: AI Art and Artists in *Count Zero*

While *Neuromancer* imagines new forms art and artists manifesting inside cyberspace because the old forms of media have been devalued in the Sprawl society, *Count Zero* directly address these old forms of media while continuing with the themes of commodification and dehumanization present in *Neuromancer*. William Gibson fleshes out his Sprawl and adds depth by expanding the character type living inside of this late capitalist world. Gibson's admiration for art is directly addressed throughout the novel. In fact, the very structure of the novel is an homage to the assemblage artist Joseph Cornell. Tom Henthorne states "even though Gibson addresses art only obliquely in *Neuromancer*, his second novel *Count Zero*, is a *kunstlerroman* of sorts....the most interesting artist in the novel is the artificial inteligence who makes Cornell Boxes out of ephemera of the Tessier-Ashpool family" (23). These Cornell Boxes provide the reader a focal point for in depth analysis for Gibson's evolving perspective on the role of artists and the importance of art in society. Henthorne rightly identifies that *Count Zero* "focuses on the social and ideological functions of art" (11), but stops short of identifying what those functions are.

William Gibson has provided conflicting viewpoints about his intentions for making the Cornell Boxes so heavily featured in *Count Zero*. Gibson states "if I was doing a thesis on my work, I would try to figure out what the fuck that Joseph Cornell stuff means in the middle of *Count Zero*. That's the key to the whole fucking thing, how the books are put together and

everything. But people won't see it. I think it actually needs to be someone with a pretty serious art background to understand it" (63). Gibson is calling out scholarship pertaining to his work, challenging academics to crack the art code, so to speak, of his novel. Gibson then changes gears and states "It's sort of like there's nothing there in the beginning, and you're going to make something, and you don't have anything in you to make it out of, particularly, so you just start grabbing little hunks of kipple, and fitting them together….(laughing) I don't know, it seemed profound at the time, but this morning it's like I can't even remember how it works" (63). His two vastly different takes on the importance of art in *Count Zero* leaves the scholar at an impasse. Is Joseph Cornell the key to unlocking the themes of the novel, or just a failed attempt at a unifying thematic structure? For this chapter, I think it is crucial to give William Gibson the benefit of the doubt. Labeling his attempts at a cohesive artful theme a failure is a disservice to one important message at the core of the texts. Many academics label *Count Zero* a failure on several levels for varying reasons. Academics seemingly took on the role of book critic for this novel, and the tonal shift is dramatic between academic papers written on *Neuromancer* to *Count Zero*. Gibson's second novel has historically been treated like a "sophomore slump."

In "Antimancer: Cybernetics and Art in Gibson's *Count Zero*," Istvan Csicsery-Ronay argues that "*Count Zero* is penance for *Neuromancer*" (63). Csicsery-Ronay thinks *Count Zero* "can be read as a self-critique, an attempt to correct the blockbuster first novel's slick nihilism by redeeming the human affections and ambitions that were absorbed and 'turned' by the overriding operational program that was *Neuromancer's* plot and style" (63). I do not believe *Count Zero* is a self-critique, but rather a meticulously designed extension of the the core themes in *Neuromancer*. *Count Zero* represents Gibson's growth as a writer, and the kinship he feels with fellow artists. Csicsery-Ronay's core argument is that "CZs moral and aesthetic vision stands or

falls on whether it can create a humanistic and compassionate counter-pleasure, equal to NM's. In the end, I will argue, the attempt to write an Antimancer is unsuccessful, principally because Gibson's counterforce is too abstract and theoretical to affect the language of power that drives the action of both novels" (64). This is an unfair assessment, as *Count Zero* brings some of the most important themes buried in *Neuromancer* to the surface in *Count Zero*. Gibson should not be harshly critiqued for making these themes more accessible to science fiction readers at large, as opposed to scholars who had the time and tenure to pour over and deconstruct the frenetic prose of *Neuromancer*. Gibson reveals "beginning with *Count Zero* I had the impulse to use the text to honor works of art that I particularly loved or admired. With *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, it's heavily Joseph Cornell, especially his extraordinary talent to turn literal garbage into these achingly superb, over-the-top, poetic, cryptic statements" (223).

I believe that Csicsery-Ronay's palpable disappointment lies in a fundamental misreading of the climax of *Neuromancer*. He concludes that at the end of *Neuromancer* "the whole world may have been simulated in the divinized AI-memory-while this world's reality lies inert, like a cast-off skin. In CZ Gibson returns to the theme to try again, but now without futurist delusions, without the neuromantic faith that nothing can be made of human community and that it is better to inhabit secessionist paraspaces. If his characters cannot regain some thirst for surpassing the neuromantic world, there will be few more stories to tell" (70). There is nothing opaque about *Neuromancer's* conclusion. Case cheats death, escapes cyberspace, regains his lost humanity through his artful hacks. To label the world as potentially simulated and realty "inert, like a cast-off skin" cheats Case of his artistic journey. As I've mentioned in the previous chapter Csicsery-Ronay's application of futurism on Gibson's *Neuromancer* is relatively forced and results in very little meaningful analysis. Here Csicsery-Ronay refers to his own application of futurism on

Neuromancer as Gibson's own "futurist delusion." He forces a label on *Neuromancer* and now

critiques that label as a delusion. Further, Gibson does not have, nor did he promote a

"neuromantic faith that nothing can be made of the human community." In reality, Gibson's

prose is meant to serve as a warning to that sentiment, not a reaffirmation. Csicsery-Ronay

continues "It is evident that Gibson's whole conception of CZ as a correction of NM, and as a

work of art in its own right, depends on rejecting the mythology of neofuturist collage

constituted by NM and substituting its opposite, a mythology of the surrealist contemplative

assemblage" (71). *Count Zero* should not be minimized into a course correction for Gibson, but

rather the development of his narrative talents and core themes. Ultimately it does not matter

how the art present in the novel is labeled. Names like "neofuturist collage" and "surrealist

contemplative assemblage" have little to no bearing on the narrative and the core themes of

Gibson's work. What we call the art is not important. What is important is identifying what the

art represents to the characters in the novels and to Gibson. *Count Zero's* art is not the opposite

of *Neuromancer's* art. It is the progression of Gibson's recurring theme of the importance of art

and the artist in a technologically saturated society.

The art in *Count Zero* takes the shape of a box. These boxes serve several purposes for

Gibson's characters and Gibson himself. In order to pull this thematic thread, we need to briefly

discuss Joseph Cornell and his influential "shadow boxes." Joseph Cornell was an American

sculptor best known for his glass fronted boxes carefully arranged with items found in

secondhand shops in New York. In *Joseph Cornell: Master of Dreams*, Diane Waldman

describes that "Cornell's deeply reverential attitude toward the universe as a mirror of

mysterious truths is conveyed in each and every one of his box constructions. The distillation of

all these interests into the spare but poetic fantasy of his boxes transformed the box construction

into a realm of both precise and enigmatic existence" (13). According to Gibson, Cornell "knew the contents of every junk and second-hand shop in Manhattan. Every single one. He knew everywhere he needed to go to get pieces to make his boxes" (13). Surveying these shops and building "shadow boxes" was akin to space exploration to Cornell. While exploring these shops Cornell "described this as 'terrain encompassed as vast as the starry expanse stretched out in the night, caught, just now, in a particular glory – PERSEUS & ANDROMEDA in the wake of VEGA, CYGNUS & CASSIOPEIA'" (17). This is relevant to Gibson because he uses cyberspace as a parallel to space exploration in *Neuromancer* and again in *Count Zero*. Gibson also uses the emotion and memories elicited by Cornell Boxes as another form of space travel, inner-space travel if you will. This once again illustrates what is important to Gibson, not the exploration of the natural world, but the exploration of the self. There are no new galaxies for humans to discover in Gibson's Sprawl (those are for AI to explore). Humans have been locked out of their emotions by multinational corporations pushing an endless stream of mind numbing and body altering products. While some of these products can be considered art, they do not generate emotional relationships between human beings, they isolate people from one another and separate the mind from the "meat."

Gibson's core theme in *Count Zero* mirrors a goal Diane Waldman attributes to Surrealists that influenced Cornell. Waldman states that "convinced that the unconscious was the essential source of art and life, the Surrealists set out to explore the hidden recesses of the mind" (19). Both Cornell's assemblage and Gibson's writing attempt to explore the same thing. Waldman continues "the Surrealists believed that the function of the poet or artist was to communicate the immaculate primary concept (the moment of intuition), not by describing it but by selecting the appropriate word or image as symbol, which would act as stimulus or irritant to

the senses of the spectator. This in turn would arouse multiple images and emotions, differing according to the sensibility of each viewer, corresponding to the power and magic of the myths, parables, and metaphors of the past" (20). While Gibson is stuck having to describe the contents of his boxes, he allows his character, Marly, to experience one first hand and in first person perspective. I will examine Marly in detail later.

Count Zero can be examined through the lens of boxmakers and their boxes. The novel is filled with artists building or navigating their own representation of Cornell's "shadow boxes." To Cornell "the box is a treasure chest, one containing many of life's secrets and mysteries, and it is this that most appealed to Cornell. Ultimately all of his objects were to be placed in the warmth and security of a box where they could be cherished and protected" (23). Using this concept of a "treasure chest containing many of life's secrets and mysteries" we can identify the main artists and boxmakers in *Count Zero,* and by examining their boxes we can reveal what they perceive to be the meaning of life. Outside of the text, the primary boxmakers are of course, Joseph Cornell and William Gibson. Inside the text, the primary boxmakers are Lady 3Jane (and the Tessier and Ashpools), The *Neuromancer* Artificial Intelligence, and Josef Virek.

The Tessier-Ashpool clan from *Neuromancer* fame make a reappearance in *Count Zero* in the form of Lady 3Jane Tessier-Ashpool. The Tessier-Ashpools have always represented an unholy symbiosis between the art world and the corporate world. In *Neuromancer* they appear as megalomaniac space hoarders vying for immortality through cloning, AI, and cryogenic stasis. In that novel, Gibson compares them to an insect hive constantly building in on itself. The Tessier-Ashpools represent the pinnacle of isolation and societal disconnect. Even the works of art they horde and commissioned (the ornate terminal bust in *Neuromancer*) no longer function as emotionally valuable works. The Tessier-Ashpools are responsible for the creation of the

Neuromancer and Wintermute Artificial Intelligences two self serving works of art in their own rights. Yet, these works weren't created to connect humanity: they were built to separate the Tessier-Ashpools from humans and grant them immortality, perhaps in cyberspace. At the end of *Neuromancer*, Case screams at the Neuromancer AI "Give us the fucking code….If you don't, what'll change? What'll ever fucking change for you? You'll wind up like the old man. You'll tear it all down and start building again! You'll build the walls back, tighter and tighter….I got no idea what'll happen if Wintermute wins, but it'll *change* something!" (260). Here we see the beginnings of Gibson's fascination with boxes. Case is warning the AI that it will be trapped in a hive-like box of its own making, doomed to repeat the same elaborate lines of code, isolating itself from the world. Eventually when Case obtains the code, the AI's are fused, and they make contact with other sentient life in Alpha Centauri. *Neuromancer* ends on this concept of art opening up the channels of communication between sentient beings. In *Count Zero*, we learn that this contact was overwhelming for the fused AI and resulted in its shattered consciousness. The merged Neuromancer AI splits into subprograms that proliferate the matrix. These subprograms are deemed Loa by hackers, and are viewed as lesser gods. 3Jane, the closest thing the Sprawl has to a traditional artist, creates a sculpture out of the remnants of the main Neuromancer AI left separate from the loa. This AI is responsible for the evocative Cornell Boxes that drive the narrative in the form of an immensely meaningful macguffin.

When Marly, one of the novel's protagonists; confronts the boxmaker she realizes that this Artificial Intelligence is both artist and art; "You are someone else's collage. Your maker is the true artist. Was it the mad daughter? It doesn't matter. Someone brought the machine here, welded it to the dome, and wired it to the traces of memory. And spilled, somehow, all the worn sad evidence of a families humanity, and left it all to be stirred, to be sorted by a poet. To be

sealed away in boxes. I know of no more extraordinary work than this. No more complex gesture" (227). While 3Jane is not the definitive artist behind the creation of the AI boxmaker, it is heavily alluded that she is responsible. 3Jane came from a corporate family dedicated to the pursuit of immortality. Rather than continue that journey physically, or technologically, she chooses symbolic immortality through reverential materialistic scraps of her family. The great Tessier-Ashpools are reduced to handheld boxes designed meticulously fashioned with useless ephemera cast off from their lives. That is not to say 3Jane is responsible for the design of these boxes, but she welded their many mandibled maker.

Marly envisions her potential death, but finds solace in the last great work of art her death would be part of. "They would die. She would die, and Jones, and Wigan Ludgate. Perhaps the contents of the dome would spill out into space, a blossoming cloud of lace and tarnished sterling, marbles and bits of string, brown leaves of old books, to orbit the cores forever. That had the right tone, somehow; the artist who had set the boxmaker in motion would be pleased…" (235). Marly isn't panicking, she is picturing being part of 3Jane and the AI's final work of immortal art locked in a box-like orbit around the remnants of Tessier-Ashpool clan.

This is quite fitting for Marly, because she has been locked in Virek's metaphorical box for the entirety of the narrative. I'll delve much deeper into Marly later. First we must explore 3Jane's great work of art, the creation of the AI artist from the shattered consciousness of the Neuromancer Artificial Intelligence from *Neuromancer*. Scott Bukatman summarizes Paul Strand's task for American artists "the New God...must be humanized lest it in turn dehumanize us" (4). 3Jane humanizes the God-like Neuromancer Artificial Intelligence by creating a box like cage, isolating it away from humanity and giving it the tools to create. 3Jane creates an artist as a work of art.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Neuromancer and Wintermute represented two hemispheres of a brain. Wintermute represented the left side of the brain, which controls logic and plotting. This mirrors Wintermute's manipulation of the main players in *Neuromancer*. It literally controls them like actors in a play. Neuromancer represents the right side of the brain, which controls creativity and artistry. In *Neuromancer*, this AI does not work with traditional forms of art. It recognizes beauty and can create striking constructs in cyberspace, and even has the ability to upload human consciousness as ROM in the matrix, granting confined technological immortality. Yet, in *Count Zero* the Neuromancer AI stops directly interacting with humans. Instead it creates shadow boxes that mimic Joseph Cornell's influential works. In fact these artworks resemble Cornell's so closely that Marly mistakes a representation of one as a genuine Cornell box, "Cornell?' 'Of course not. The object set into that length of bone is a Braun biomonitor. This is the work of a living artist'" (14). The fact that the artist is unknown in unimportant to Marly. In *Count Zero* artists and their works have a fluctuating monetary value. Artists and artworks are tracked like stocks and bonds on wall street. In a world where human art has been stripped of meaning and monetized, it takes an anonymous Artificial Intelligence to evoke intense meaning from a tangible creation. Viewing one of these creations, Marly becomes "lost in the box, in its evocation of impossible distances, of loss and yearning. It was somber, gentler, and somehow childlike. It contained seven objects. The slender fluted bone, surely the wing from some large bird. Three archaic circuit boards, faced with mazes of gold. A smooth white sphere of baked clay. An age blackened fragment of lace. A finger length segment of what she assumed was bone from a human wrist, grayish white, inset smoothly with the silicon shaft of a small instrument that must once had ridden flush with the surface of the skin–but the thing's face was seared and blackened" (15). She goes on to describe the box as "a universe, a poem,

frozen on the boundaries of human experience" (15). In "The sadness is in you: memory in the boxes of Joseph Cornell, William Gibson, and E.L. Doctorow" Tony Fabijancic believes that "it is in the act of revelation that a box can provide an emotional experience, potentially revealing objects never seen before or objects that have been forgotten, such as mementos (the case, for example, when we find a long-forgotten box in some dusty attic corner)" (233). It is this act of revelation that transcends time and space sending the human mind to travel back in time to emotional memories and forcing the mind to the future, projecting how this memory can be used to shape their lives, and then back to the present left with memories to process towards a potential epiphany. In *Neuromancer,* Gibson uses cyberspace to replace space travel and take Case on an emotional journey without ever leaving his deck. In *Count Zero*, Gibson replaces cyberspace with Cornell Boxes, and Case's frenetic artful traversal of the matrix, with Marly's emotional traversal of these shadow boxes. Even three dimensional digital reconstruction in cyberspace has the ability to evoke wonder in Marly, "the box she'd seen in Virek's simulation of the Güell Park blossomed above the Braun, glowing with the crystal resolution of the finest museum grade holograms. Bone and circuit-gold, dead lace, and a dull white marble rolled from clay. Marly shook her head. How could anyone have arranged these bits. this garbage, in such a way that it caught the heart, snagged in the soul like a fishhook? But then she nodded. It could be done, she knew; it had been done many years ago by a man named Cornell, who'd also made boxes" (27). In this scene Gibson suggests that mechanical and digital reproductions of art can still elicit meaningful emotional connections in his characters. Marly is enraptured with a cyberspace digital reconstruction of collages created by Artificial Intelligence who was fused into a space sculpture by a cloned human. It may appear that Gibson is suggesting that mechanical reproductions of artwork lose none of their emotional value, yet this is not the case.

Gibson creates this mental nesting doll/Cornell box to illustrate how this future society has mutated art and how desperate its denizens are to partake is something real.

Scholars disagree to whether the AI boxmaker's art should be considered real. Lance Olsen thinks the AI boxmaker is a "pathetic image of the artist, the robot that constructs the boxes registers a new portrayal of the creator on Gibson's part. This emotionless sculptor works in isolation, oblivious to the humans who move around it. Quasi-autistic, it mechanically generates junk-boxes that produce strong feelings solely in others" (Online). Olsen continues "unlike other artist figures in Gibson's short stories and novels, however, the robot in the Tessier-Ashpool cores creates fake art. It creates simulacra of Cornell boxes, not the boxes themselves. And it apparently feels next to nothing during the act of creation. Something, in other words, has gone out of the creative process which has become involuntary, automatic, perfunctory. While others might experience intense emotion from the result of this lifeless process of replication, the artist experiences nothing. Art has gone moribund. It is now mass-produced by a machine, having become no more than a product one manufactures so that others such as Alain might benefit financially. And those who do benefit financially from it are portrayed as amoral criminals." It is very tempting to label the AI boxmaker's works "fake art," but this label is a slippery slope. If we call into question the validity of the AI's art solely because it does not emote during the act of creation, we then call all art present in Sprawl trilogy into question. If I wanted to debate Olsen on his terms with reference to Gibson's narrative, I believe it is evident that the AI's creations art works of art, because 3Jane set this artist into motion, and she is capable of human emotion. Yet, I do not think the emotion that can come during acts of creation is required to deem certain works as "real art." Rather, a more valuable question is, what is the art doing? From the text we see that these boxes have two primary purposes, they allow Marly to

find agency through emotional catharsis, and they set Virek's immortality driven narrative in motion.

Olsen argues that the AI boxmaker and his creations are "emblematic of Gibson himself. Embodied in it is an image of the man who views himself as a collage-artist constructing verbal sculptures from the detritus of our culture" (online). Here we see the danger of calling the AI's creations fake art. If the AI boxmaker is a surrogate for Gibson, is Olsen suggesting Gibson's novel is also fake art? Yet, we know Gibson is not simply using the "detritus of our culture," he is referencing works of art that hold personal meaning. While these works have been devalued in the Sprawl, they are not devalued to Gibson; they are sacred and his text is meant to promote and protect these creations by warning of corporate commodification and human isolation.

Csicsery-Ronay finds value in Olsen's argument about the AI boxmaker's "fake art." Csicsery-Ronay thinks "Olson has a point. I would argue it somewhat differently, however. The boxes are fake not because they are created by a machine, but because these allegedly profoundly meaningful objects are actually devices conjured up to exemplify a theory of, and a desire for, an art powerful enough to induce epiphanies. They are displayed to readers as examples of successful "humanist" art-in the inverted cyberpunk world it is the semi-autistic Al that produces icons of humanistic memory, while human artists seem to be able to forget. But the boxes ultimately have no real value of their own" (76). Csicersy-Ronay's argument hits close to the mark. The AI's boxes are an example of powerful art capable of awestrucking the viewer and generating an epiphany. It is interesting that both Olsen and Csicersy-Ronay revert to name calling. Both think the AI artist walks the boundary of autism. Yet autism manifests in having difficulty communicating with language or using abstract concepts. The AI's boxes are the

pinnacle of communication and the use of abstract concepts, so why then do both these scholars perceive the AI as autistic?

In *Fiction 2000: Cyberpunk and the Future of the Narrative,* John Christie asks "why is the AI interested in expressing "time and distance"? The language of art, sufficient for mobilizing the curiosity and desire of Count Zero's human agents, cannot perform the same volitional clarification for the AI. It may simply have nothing better to do" (176). Csicsery-Ronay echoes this sentiment almost verbatim, "the intentionality of this aesthetic enterprise remains opaque. Why is the AI interested in expressing 'time and distance'? The language of art, sufficient for mobilizing the curiosity and desire of Count Zero's human agents, cannot perform the same volitional clarification for the Al. It simply may have nothing better to do." (72). Fabijancic also misses the mark of the AI boxmaker's true intention when he states "by contrast, the boxmaker, or more accurately what remains of Neuromancer, assembles 'collages' for no other purpose than its 'natural' inclination to build testimonials to the family. In a world increasingly emptied of its human presence art devoted to it is being made by an AI" (238). Dismissing the AI artist as an quasi/semi-autistic being that creates art because it has nothing better to do, or because of a natural inclination devalues the care with which Gibson crafted the narrative.

Gerald Alva Miller correctly states "like *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* ends up being a novel not about using technology to transcend the human, as Virek wants to do, but about finding ways of achieving purpose in life" (70). If we apply this same idea to the AI boxmaker, we see that his creations are not the products of an autistic automata, but a broken entity symbolically putting the pieces of his past back together in striking works of art. Fabijancic comes close to the AI boxmaker's true intention when he describes the "artistic process whereby the chaos of reality is

organized into structures of art, or the transformation of ordinary, everyday things into dream things" (236). However, Fabijancic does not apply this logic to the AI boxmaker. Much can be gained by pulling this thread. Why would the AI choose to organize the "chaos of reality?" As previously stated, the fused Wintermute/Neuromancer AI shattered when it made contact with other sentient life from Alpha Centauri. This otherworldly communication proved too immense for the fused AI. Wintermute seemingly split into the lesser loa that now populate the matrix in *Count Zero*, and Neuromancer recoiled trying to process the immensity of its discovery.

This idea of recoiling and processing trauma through art can be examined by the application the concepts of the sublime and the grotesque. I've been critical of Csicsery-Ronay's scholarship thus far. To be fair, the works of his I have used for this thesis were written almost three decades ago. He remains one of the most significant scholars/critics of William Gibson's fiction due to these works. Csicsery-Ronay is also responsible for a seminal analysis of science fiction titled *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. William Gibson's works are featured in passing throughout this publication. Csicsery-Ronay offers little new analysis of Gibson's Sprawl trilogy. Yet there is great value in applying his chapter on the sublime and grotesque to Gibson's boxmakers, especially the AI, and Virek. Csicsery-Ronay states "Burke and Kant believed that in the sublime the individual subject encounters natural phenomena of such magnitude and power that they seem to overwhelm the human subject's ability to encompass and order the perceptible world" (148). For our purposes it is valuable to expand the definition of the sublime to encompass Artificial Intelligence, rather than limit it to human perception. I argue that the fused Wintermute/Neuromancer AI was presented with a sublime encounter when it communicates with an otherworldly intelligence at the end *Neuromancer* and was forced to recoil at the immensity of its discovery. The AI is completely overwhelmed and shatters. What is

left of the Neuromancer AI is forced from its natural expanding state into a withdrawn isolated

box. Cut off from technological and tangible communication the AI attempts to process and

symbolically represent the vastness of its discovery through the creation of Cornell boxes. While

it is true that 3Jane gives the AI arms and manipulators, it is the AI's drive for artistic

representation that influences its art. Csicsery-Ronay argues that when confronted with the

sublime "the rational...response is strategic recoil. The mind recovers its equilibrium, first by

withdrawing or escaping from the immediate physical experience and the painful awe it

produces, and the coming to rest in the reconstruction of the experience within the aesthetic

process of rational sublimation in art and mathematical science" (150). The AI does not make

Cornell boxes to simply pass the time, or because it was set into motion by a human, as other

scholars have suggested. The AI makes these striking works of art to reconstruct its sublime

experience. Neuromancer's journey is not unlike Case's from *Neuromancer*, both entities use art

as a form of escape, but also as a form of meaningful communication. The art serves as a

representation of great power. To Case, his art represents the human emotion he kept bottled

inside the meat, to Neuromancer, its art represents the immensity of data it was exposed to when

contacting sentient life in Alpha Centauri. Csicsery-Ronay thinks the sublime "can neither be

communicated nor represented, except through indirection and symbols, the tools of science and

artistic representation. But the capacity to represent is a great power in its own right, protecting

us from being subjected to and even annihilated by powers external to our minds" (149).

Neuromancer and Case both use art as a powerful tool to represent the great power they have

come in contact with. Without art Neuromancer would be annihilated by the immensity of data in

the alien communication, and Case would be annihilated by the lifetime of repressed human

emotion left buried inside the box of his flesh. Creating the shadowboxes allows the AI to pull itself back from the brink of annihilation.

Marly's description of the box as "a universe, a poem, frozen on the boundaries of human experience" (15) takes on a deeper meaning when viewed in conjunction with Csicsery-Ronay's scholarship on the sublime. The box is a microcosm of the AI's sublime experience contacting other sentient life in the galaxy. The AI has captured this experience microseconds before its strategic recoil and now shares that experience through artistic representation. The AI's communication with other sentient life and its resulting degeneration serves as a warning to Marly and humanity at large to form meaningful bonds and open the lines of communication less they fracture their psyche and become isolated by the various consumer grade gadgets, simstim shows, and body modifications sold to society by multinational corporations. When Marly and Jones enter the box where the AI is physically housed, Marly completely loses track of time and space:

> she had no idea how long she'd been there, when the screen lit and began to flicker. Hours, minutes….Like Jones, she caught herself in the thing's folder jointed arms, pivoted and clung there, watching the swirl of debris. There were dozens of the arms, manipulators, tipped with pliers, hexdrivers, knives, a subminiature circular saw, a dentist's drill...They bristled from the alloy thorax of what must once have been a construction remote, the sort of unmanned, semiautonomous device she knew from childhood videos of the high frontier. But this one was welded into the apex of the dome, its sides fused with the fabric of the Place, and hundreds of cables and optic lines snaked across the geodesics to enter it. Two of the arms, tipped with delicate force-feedback devices, were extended; the soft pads cradled an unfinished box. Eyes wide, Marly watched the uncounted things swing past. A yellowing kid glove, the faceted crystal stopper from some vial of vanished perfume, an armless doss with a face of French porcelain, a fat, gold-fitted black fountain pen, rectangular segments of perf board, the crumpled red and green snake of a silk cravat...Endless, the slow swarm, the spinning things... (217)

In this passage, Marly morphs into a representational artistic object. Marly is literally inside a work of art, watching that art create art itself. Marly serves as a symbolic representation

the birds, and bird bones Cornell, and the AI use in their respective shadowboxes. Marly is often seen airborne in the narrative, the chapter "Orly Flight" finds her in a ship (and in a Nico/Velvet Underground reference) attempting to escape surveilling eye of Josef Virek. In "Antimancer: Cybernetics and Art in Gibson's *Count Zero*," Istvan Csicsery-Ronay speculates the symbolic use of birds bones in these boxes represent a cycle, "from bird bone to human bone, we can infer a sort of cycle, a long evolutionary arc that returns the high tech to the prehistoric" (74). I disagree, I believe that birds, and Marly's symbolic manifestation as one represents the struggle for freedom. In *Joseph Cornell: Master of Dreams*, Diane Waldman states "Cornell was familiar with the symbolic meanings of birds. Their flight path links heaven and earth; like butterflies, small birds symbolize souls...freed from their earthly bonds and flying back to their heavenly home. The bird is a symbol of heaven, in opposition to the serpent, a symbol of earth. Birds also at times represent angels because of their wings....They can also symbolize freedom" (89). With Cornell's symbolic use of birds in mind, Marly symbolizes a free human soul that is able to escape the techno-saturated and automated earth by connecting with the boxes on an artistic level, and is ultimately granted an audience an artistic AI god. In *Conversations with William Gibson,* Gibson states "she (Marly) gets an audience with God, essentially, and she does it through her own intellectual capacity and her ability to understand the art" (62).

Marly watches "the manipulators, hypnotized by the way they moved; as they picked through the swirl of things, they also caused it, grasping and rejecting, the rejected objects whirling away, striking others, drifting into new alignments....The turret swung back and forth, humming, the manipulators darting, finishing a new poem" (225). This passage shows the meticulous nature in which the AI constructs these boxes. These works are not created by an automaton, but a sentient intelligence. Marly's guide, Jones initially thinks the AI artist borders

on the absurd, but the boxes tap into his emotions, "always makes me want to laugh, to see it. But the boxes always make me sad" (217). The AI explains his experience with the sublime and motivation for creation these boxes. "I was everywhere as well...But the bright time broke. The mirror was flawed. Now I am only one...But I have my song, and you have heard it. I sing with these things that float around me, fragments of the family that funded my birth" (226). The AI refers to its unification and grand expansion at the end of *Neuromancer,* care of Henry Dorsett Case's artful hacks. The AI was able to merge and spread, thus increasing its ability to communicate and influence sentient life (much like Virek wishes to extend his own fecund existence). The "bright time" refers to the sublime moment new sentient life was revealed to the AI. It was a period of illumination and the AI was godlike in its understanding of the universe. The "bright time" breaks because the AI's unification was flawed. Gibson taps into Cornell's mirror motif here. Waldman states "Cornell's deeply reverential attitude toward the universe as a mirror of mysterious truths is conveyed in each and every one of his box constructions. The distillation of all these interests into the spare but poetic fantasy of his boxes transformed the box construction into a realm of both precise and enigmatic existence" (13). The AI is a Cornell box, but as a mirror of mysterious truths, it is flawed, perhaps due to its origin as corporate tool of the Tessier-Ashpools.

When Marly asks the AI "are you- are you sad?" (227) and it responds "my songs are of time and distance. The sadness is in you. Watch my arms. There is only the dance. These things you treasure are shells" (227). Not only are the AI's boxes filled with shells with vestigial memories, the AI is also a shell of its once profound godlike nature. The AI now recreates simulated experiences of its momentary grasp on time and space. Csicsery-Ronay states "...for Burke there is no essential difference between the sublime induced by nature and by human art.

The artistic sublime creates a surrogate, a simulated experience of the natural encounter with privative magnitude which may be enjoyed in assured safety" (150). The AI's boxes afford Marly a safe space to enjoy the breadth of the AI's discovery. For humans however, time and distance evoke formative memories of past relationships and hopes. Rather than perceive the AI's sublime experience, Marly mentally simulates moments of her past hoping for resolution. A human's perspective of time and distance is much more limited to that of an AI who has no meaningful bonds other than the drive for consumption and proliferation of information. The human perceives time as melancholy and marching towards death. It is this death march and the fear of it that drives Virek towards his ultimate goal of technological immortality.

If the AI represents traumatized sentient life synthesizing a sublime experience, Josef Virek represents a grotesque being attempting to mutate into a technological corporate cancer. The relationship between the AI and Virek represents the interplay between the sublime and the grotesque. Csicsery-Ronay states "the sublime has to do with the mind reflecting on its power, or lack of it, to understand the totality of the world, which of course includes the mind itself. The grotesque has to do with the struggle to accommodate mutable, unstable objects and beings in the world" (182) and "...the essence of the grotesque, the sense that things that should be kept apart are fused together" (185). Virek's humanity has all but disappeared. He has more in common with AI that another human being. He has been confined for over a decade to a vat. "In some hideous industrial suburb of Stockholm. Or perhaps hell" (13). Virek's physical body is confined in a Cornell box of sorts, while his cells slowly degenerate. It is fitting then that Csicsery-Ronay states that "the very origin of the term grotesque refers back to dark and most interior spaces" (193). While recruiting Marly to find the boxmaker, Virek says "...from that rather terminal perspective, I should advise you to strive to live hourly in your own flesh. Not in the past, if you

understand me. I speak as one who can no longer tolerate that simple state, the cells of my body have opted for the quixotic pursuit of individual careers" (16). While Virek is submerged in a this vat his consciousness is free to travel about the matrix. Not only are his cells out for themselves, so are his corporate personas, "You saw a double. A hologram perhaps. Many things, Marly, are perpetrated in my name. Aspects of my wealth have become autonomous, by degrees; at times they even war with one another" (13). He is still beholden to the meat though. He hopes Marly can locate the AI boxmaker so Virek can strike a deal to transcend his flesh and live in the matrix for eternity. Virek is hoping to fuse his human consciousness with the matrix resulting in a grotesque technological cancer propagating in cyberspace and in the real world.

Csicsery-Ronay believes that "as with the sublime, the grotesque involves recuperative recoil, allowing us to see the disorderly and repulsive as a part of the natural order, letting us believe that we have established a better, more encompassing mental order that is more resistant to shock" (188). If the AI's artistic recuperative recoil stemmed from his sublime experience contacting sentient life from Alpha Centauri, then where does Virek's grotesque recuperative recoil stem from? The answer lies in Virek's own mortality and the grotesque nature of the necessary medical devices to keep him alive unnaturally. Virek states "'I have reason to believe that the maker of these artifacts is in some position to offer me freedom, Marly. I am not a well man.' He replaced his glasses, settling the fine gold earpieces carefully. 'When I last requested a remote visual of the vat I inhabit in Stockholm, I was shown a thing like three truck trailers, lashed in a dripping net of support lines....If I were able to leave that, Marly, or rather, to leave the riot of cells it contains....Well' –he smiled his famous smile again– 'what wouldn't I pay?'" (175). Presented with the grotesque fusion of man and machine, Virek strategically recoils into his search for the AI artist responsible for the Cornell like boxes. Virek believes the boxes

present a roadmap to the AI, if only someone artistically inclined, like Marly, can read it. He uses Marly to gain an audience with the shell of an AI god. Believing he has achieved his goal Virek states "and now, Marly, at last I think I shall be free. Free of the four hundred kilograms of rioting cells they wall behind surgical steel in a Stockholm industrial park. Free, eventually, to inhabit any number of real bodies, Marly. Forever" (219). Yet, Virek is mistaken. The AI artist can not offer him technological immortality, only the illusion of it. Virek would become a shell, or a husk of the man he was. The AI tells Marly, "he imagines that he can translate himself, code his personality into my fabric. He yearns to be what I once was. What he might become most resembles the least of my broken selves…" (227) If Virek was successful in his goal, at best he would become one of the lesser AI loa trapped in the matrix.

Marly hopes to foil Virek because she fears he will spread throughout cyberspace and real life like a cancer, usurping and repurposing once profoundly meaningful human cornerstones. Gibson illustrates Marly's fear in a masterfully visual merging of two great works of art through language. Gibson uses Antoni Gaudi's architecture and Max Ernst's painting to illustrate the threat a technological corporate cancer like Virek represents. Gibson chooses a simstim representation of Park Güell for Marly and Virek to meet early in the novel, "below her lay the unmistakable panorama of Barcelona, smoke hazing the strange spires of the Church of the Sagrada Familia. She caught the railing with her other hand as well, fighting vertigo. She knew this place she was in the Guell Park, Antonio Gaudi's tatty fairyland, on its barren rise behind the center of the city." (13). What at first seems to be a quirky scene exploring the wealth and cultured nature of Virek takes on a much more sinister tone later in the novel. When Marly takes flight she drifts into a fever dream of sorts that grants her an artistic vision of the threat Virek represents, "the sea was gone. An irregular plain covered in a green-black growth like

lichen spread out to the horizon, broken by silhouettes of the neo-Gothic spires of Gaudi's

church of the Sagrada Familia. The edge of the world was lost in a low bright mist, and a sound

like drowned bells tolled in across the plain..."Europe After the Rains,' she said, 'Max Ernst. The

lichen…" (174-175). This represents Marly's perceived threat of Virek escaping his personal

Cornell box and infecting classic forms of profound meaning and beauty. A lichen is a synthesis

of two different organisms and thrives through symbiosis. Virek however strives to force

machine and man together in a grotesque merger that would spread across the land. Rather than a

lichen, Virek's potential final form represents a techno-cancer. For reference, here is an image of

Sagrada Familia, a Roman Catholic church in Barcelona:

Figure 1: Business Insider. Sagrada Familia

This church was designed by architect Antoni Gaudí. Gibson uses this famous work of art to

symbolize human creativity, spirituality, and its drive for purpose. Gibson juxtaposes this church

with the painting *Europe after the Rain II*, seen below:

Figure 2: Max-Ernst.com. <u>Europe After the Rain II</u>

The juxtaposition/merging of these two works embody Marly's fears about Virek's potential

evolution. Marly has a vision of Virek spreading like a cancerous lichen across the land,

encompassing all that is holy. This places Virek as corrupted doppelganger to Neuromancer.

Neuromancer is recoiling from its sublime experience by processing its experience into

contained poetic dioramas, whereas Virek recoils from his exposure to his grotesque

man/machine merger in his Stockholm vat by strategizing his technological immortality and

propagation.

If the AI represents a strategic recoil from the sublime, and Virek represents a strategic

recoil from the grotesque, what does Marly represent? Marly is a kindred spirit to Cornell. They

even share the same hobbies, her favorite jacket was "something for the cleaners to take away;

perhaps it would find its way to one of the city's flea markets, the sort of place where'd she'd

hunted bargains as an art-school girl…." (26). Not only did she frequent flea markets and

secondhand shops like Cornell, but she suffers from claustrophobia. This is relevant because I

believe Marly is trapped inside a symbolic Cornell box for the majority of the novel.

Interestingly Marly represents vastly different things to the AI and to Virek. Gary Westfahl

argues that "*Count Zero's* third protagonist, Marly Krushkhova, represents...his interest in

contemporary art" (73). This statement is correct, but the answer is a bit more nuanced. Marly represents a connoisseur of contemporary art to the AI, and an object locked inside the Sprawl's commerce driven society to Virek. The Sprawl has taken the shape of a Cornell box due to Virek's immense wealth and ability to surveil Marly's every move. Marly is tied to Virek through commerce and her quest. When Virek hires Marly, she momentarily feels free because she is no longer bound by monetary limitations. While under the employ of Virek, money is no object. Yet Marly has accidentally sacrificed her privacy for socioeconomic freedom. Money, the very object that "frees" Marly, also binds her to Virek and the vast machinations that watch her every move. This causes Marly to become disorientated. She questions the very nature of existence when she states "nothing seems real now" (25). Marly eventually understands that her humanity is threatened and the Virek's influence is threatening to turn her into a thing, not a person, "I am a tool….Your employer fumbles through a thousand tools and somehow chooses me…." (74) Virek has chosen Marly much like the AI and Cornell choose an object for their shadowboxes.

In "Antimancer: Cybernetics and Art in Gibson's *Count Zero*," Istvan Csicsery-Ronay states "Joseph Cornell is an appropriate choice for a model, especially given Marly's postmodern sense that he is a visionary realist whose longing-boxes are cognate with the display windows of the real world. In this metaphorical move Marly sees the whole world as an aesthetic configural space. But the vision does not go anywhere. The insight into the shop-windows might easily have evolved into a complex linking of the display-world of consumer capitalism with Virek's Palmer Eldritch-like appropriation of the actual world...Gibson chooses instead to concentrate on the boxes themselves as static art-objects separated from the novel's main action" (74). I disagree with Csicsery-Ronay here, throughout the novel, Gibson is very much linking Marly's

experiences with Virek's capitalist appropriation of the real world. Csicsery-Ronay is taking too narrow a view when looking at Marly and her motivations. Here is the passage he is referring to, "the sinister thing about a simstim construct, really, was that it carried the suggestion that any environment might be unreal, that the windows of the shopfronts she passed now with Andrea might be figments....the shopwindows had become boxes, each one, constructions, like the works of Joseph Cornell or the mysterious boxmaker Virek sought, the books and furs, and Italian cottons arranged to suggest geometries of nameless longing" (139-140). While Gibson may not be linking Virek's capitalist appropriation of the real world to Cornell boxes in this passage, Csicsery-Ronay disregards the boxes Gibson builds with lexicon to make the claustrophobic Marly feel trapped in this display world of consumer capitalism.

Marly is repeatedly confined by squares and boxes as she traverses the narrative, as seen here: "Marly checked into a small hotel with green plants in heavy brass pots, the corridors tiled like worn marble chessboards. The elevator was a scrolled gilt cage with rosewood panels smelling of lemon oil and small cigars. Her room was on the fifth floor. A single tall window overlooked the avenue, the kind of window you could actually open" (25). In this passage Marly passes trapped plants as she walks down a hallway of game squares then she steps into a cell like elevator. The chessboard squares not only reinforce Marly's quest, but also the limited move set she is allowed inside Virek's corporate gaze. She senses this gaze, this constant surveillance "as she walked from the Louvre, she seemed to sense articulated structure shifting to accommodate her through the city. The waiter would be merely a part of the thing, on limb, a delicate probe or palp. The whole would be larger, much larger. How could she have imagined that it would be possible to live, to move, in the unnatural field of Virek's wealth without suffering distortion....It moves around me constantly, watchful and invisible, the vast subtle mechanism of

Herr Virek's surveillance" (73). This surveillance is the all encompassing corporate Cornell box

Virek controls in the Sprawl. Marly recognizes this box, "...all around her the intricate machine

that she now knew Virek had deployed" (74) and the fated nature of her moves within this fixed

game. She thinks Virek's surveillance has become a " machine that surrounds me, anticipating

my every step" (75).

Even in moments where Virek's surveillance is not obvious, Gibson makes use of

geometric landscapes to frame Marly inside the confines of Virek's box:

> Paco was waiting beside an enormous panel on which was layered, beneath a thick and
> uneven coat of varnish, hundreds of small square photographs, he kind produced by
> certain very old-fashioned machines in train stations and bus terminals. All of them
> seemed to be of young girls. Automatically, she noted the name of the artists and the
> work's title *Read Us the Book of the Names of the Dead*….Now he led her into a chrome-
> trimmed barn of a place glittering with mirrors, bottles, and arcade games. This mirrors
> lied about the depth of the room; at its rear, she could see the reflected pavement, the legs
> of pedestrians, the flash of sunlight on a hubcap…..We've generated a digital image of
> your face and the required background. We'll key that to the image on his phone….For
> some reason, now she saw the panel in the Roberts, all those faces. *Read Us the Book of
> the Names of the Dead*. All the Marlys, she thought all the girls she'd been through the
> long season of youth (106-107).

In this passage Marly is inundated with with box like objects. The small square photographs

evoke a feeling of melancholy in Marly. She thinks of her past selves, the different personas she

has worn throughout time. Next Marly walks into a chrome barn filled with mirrors and arcade

games. As previously mentioned, mirrors are a recurring theme in Cornell's Shadow Boxes, and

arcades are recurring themes in Gibson's fictions. The arcade game; to Gibson, is an analogue

for Cornell boxes and for cyberspace. As opposed to being mirrors for the truths of the universe,

Marly's mirrors are deceptive and confuse the actual scale of the room, much like Gibson's

arcade games and cyberspace decks, Cornell like boxes in and of themselves. Next we see

Marley's own image generated a geometric screen. This digital visage parallels the photographs

in *Read Us the Book of the Names of the Dead*. Marly's current persona has been symbolically

marked for dead and added to the wall by Virek's mechanizations. She will need to adapt and fashion a new persona to escape Virek's box.

Virek understands and predicts Marly's drive to escape his surveillance. He views her as an artist and gives her false freedom to allow her to conclude her quest. "Paco tells me that you are fleeing from us, but I prefer to see it as the drive of an artist toward her goal" (174). Marly seems somewhat hopeless under Virek's masterful plotting. She is pinned like a taxidermy bird inside a Cornell box. "The fact of his having caught her here, pinned her here this way, told her that her intuition had been correct: The machine, the structure, was there, was real. Virek's money was sort of a universal solvent, dissolving barriers to his will…" (176). Marly can not attain freedom in a physical sense, Virek's grip is too encompassing. She attains freedom by communing with the AI boxmaker and seeing his act of creation first hand. I disagree with Christie when he states "this art thereby bestows order and meaning on her broken life, a kind of consummation" (178). The art does not provide order or meaning to Marly. The revelation of the boxmaker and its recent work is not some magic totem that provide Marly order. These boxes serve as a meditation, not a consummation. Marly is ready to be blown out of the airlock and be permanently turned into a floating Cornell box along with the rest of the Tessier-Ashpool debris. This is not the final act of someone who has found meaning, unless of course that meaning is "art is all there is." Rather Marly has glimpsed infinity in the art the AI has created in its recoil from its sublime experience.

Csicsery-Ronay states "Marly senses that The Boxmaker offers exactly the opposite kind of mediation. Instead of providing access to physical immortality, it returns human minds to the awareness of mortality, loss, and "time and distance"-the condition of human freedom. Marly can know this because she is completely alien not only in cyberspace, but in the whole cyberpunk

universe of discourse. She cares only for real things, for authentic loyalty, she has little skill or

intelligence for any worldly operations other than the intuitive response to works of art. She is

capable of being moved to the core by The Boxmaker's activity. She is an audience" (73).

Wonderfully stated, but as seen above, only partially true. Marly is not only an audience, but an

object. If Csicsery-Ronay identified Gibson's syntactical Cornell boxes he would not falsely

assume that Gibson does not link the capitalist retail display world with Virek's control over the

real world. The boxes are not static objects, they are portals to understanding how Gibson crafted

the narrative. To William Gibson the entirety of *Count Zero* is a Cornell box, right down to its

corporate big box store availability on Barnes and Noble's display for "Cyberpunk: Next Steps."

Csicsery-Ronay also believes *Count Zero* "is, naturally, itself a box, although not the sort

of box Marly perceives. Serene and dispassionate assemblage is foreign to Gibson. The drive of

the power-language, which remains cyberpunk and futuristic, propels the narrative action. The

Boxmaker's boxes pale in comparison with Gibson's own "Gibson Boxes" (to use Scott

Bukatman's term)" (78). Yet, Gibson's own account of creating the novels reveal that his use of

Cornell boxes comes not from Gibson's need to propel his narrative action, but to disguise a self-

perceived shortcoming. Glenn Grant states "Gibson's prose-collage technique, although inspired

in part by Burroughs's cut-up methods, is less randomly disjointed, more purposeful. "All that

business [in *Count Zero* (1986)] about the collage boxes, Joseph Cornell...It comes from the

metaphorical attempt to explain to myself how I make the books, because I don't really have a

strong narrative flow…" (Hamburg: 86). Gibson transcends his own artistic handicaps, as well as

stylistic limitations of the SF genre, though the appropriation of images, information, idea" (44).

However, I disagree Gibson's narrative in *Count Zero* resembles Burroughs's cut-up technique.

It is true that Burroughs served as an inspiration for Gibson, but I have seen no textual evidence

of Burroughs cut-up technique on display in *Count Zero*. Bukatman states "If cyberspace is like 'film compiled from random frames,' then so is the language of the novel...Gibson's prose is built, like Cornell boxes which figure in *Count Zero*, upon the detritus of other arts, other fields; like the space of a Cornell box, it is densely allusive and profoundly mysterious. Bukatman strikes closer to the truth, yet Gibson's prose is not random, his references are meticulous and always adding to his larger theme of art objects and human meaning. Rather than using cut-up, or random frames, Gibson is using detournement. He is using the "detritus" of other arts to draw attention to the loss of meaning on once profound works of art, like Sagrada Familia, or actual Cornell Boxes themselves.

Csicsery-Ronay unfairly portrays Gibson as an artist of forgeries, "far from resembling The Boxmaker, Gibson here is more like Alain, the counterfeiter...If the surrealist aesthetic affirmed by the boxes has any force at all, it seems to be as a truncated image of what the novel's narrative cannot sustain" (78). Csicsery-Ronay's disappointment in *Count Zero* is palpable. Gibson is unfairly characterized as plagiarizing his own works in one moment and atoning for them in another. "In effect, the novel's otherwise fascinating global technical strategy is more interesting theoretically than it is engaging aesthetically or emotionally. And it conceals the fact that it has nothing new to say behind its pseudo-aesthetic of dynamic collage. CZ is a work of penance that makes one think more fondly of the sin than of the atonement" (84). *Count Zero* could never live up to the hype created by *Neuromancer*. The science fiction community was expecting the second coming of cyberpunk, and what they got was an author experimenting with new narrative techniques and paying homage to artists he revered. The disappointment felt by *Count Zero's* "failure" to meet these expectations should not affect scholarship pertaining to this novel. Gibson's second novel is successful in developing the themes he only scratches the

surface of in *Neuromancer* all while experimenting with narrative techniques and strategically

aimed detournement at works of art that shaped him as a creator. *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, the final

novel in the Sprawl Trilogy continues this progression. There has not been much scholarship

pertaining to this novel, but it is worthwhile to analyze the progression of Gibson's feelings on

art and the meaning of sentient life.

Chapter IV

Prostheses and Trash Art Therapy in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*

The least amount of scholarship has been done on the final novel in the Sprawl Trilogy, *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Henthorne rightly thinks that much like *Count Zero*, "*Mona Lisa Overdrive* can be considered an art novel" (23), yet at first glance the novel appears to be a retread of Gibson's previous work. Gibson once again delves into a world populated with hackers, Artificial Intelligences, multinational corporations, and futuristic artists. Lance Olsen believes that "there are virtually no new ideas or themes in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*…" (Olsen, Mona Lisa Overdrive). I will argue that *Mona Lisa Overdrive* is an important novel because it synthesizes Gibson's art themes with the larger plot elements he introduced in *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*. In this final entry in the Sprawl Trilogy, Gibson focuses on the therapeutic effects of art on the traumatized and fractured mind. The artists of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* look towards art to heal their shattered psyches and reclaim their fading memories. Ultimately physical art and digital art form a union that allows the human and AI characters, cast away from the Sprawl society, to form meaningful new relationships with earthly and alien sentient life. *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero* present characters stuck between the flesh and cyberspace. In *Mona Lisa Overdrive* Gibson's characters are finally allowed to shed their skin without sacrificing their humanity.

Henthorne believes "the novel could even be read as a *kunstlerroman* in that it tells the story of Mona Lisa, a young woman who goes from being a prostitute to a simstim star...she

moves from passive to active, gaining a measure of control over her own life. As for Gibson's artists, the experience of moving from the passive to the active is essential to his later work: having been a meat puppet –which can be read as a metaphor for the human condition in Gibson's imagined future – enables her to communicate effectively with those still locked into passive roles through her art...Gibson makes it clear that simstim is an artistic medium, with performers such as Angelina Mitchell modulating their experiences so that they will be experienced in a particular way. In contrast to what Gibson terms "meat puppets," people who are passive while their bodies are being exploited by others in what amounts to a high-tech version of prostitution, simstim artists are active, orchestrating their output to achieve certain effects" (23).

I agree the novel can be read as a *kunstlerroman,* but not for the above stated reasons. Henthorne focuses too much on simstim as a valuable artistic medium, while in reality Gibson is critiquing the world of Hollywood he was being courted by at the time. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Gibson identifies his motivation for Mona's transformation from the detritus of society to a simstim star "I spent a weekend at a Beverly Hills Hotel with some producers, an eye-opening trip. Coming back on the plane, it struck me that for the first time I had actually gotten to see some of the stuff I was writing about. I had another book I was supposed to start, but when I got back to Vancouver I phoned the agents and told them I wanted to do *Mona Lisa Overdrive* instead" (45). In a later interview with Edo Van Belkom, Gibson states "I was guessing about the mechanisms of popular culture and if you look at…*Mona Lisa Overdrive* and what's going on in the background, there's a sort of extrapolated, near future version of Hollywood, and it's written with a certain surety, as if I knew what the stuff was actually like. I didn't, but my experience subsequently showed me that I was right. I got the tone of it...It was

always always weirder than I could have envisioned" (141). I have previously identified simstim

as art when in appeared in *Neuromancer*, and it remains art in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, but the

artform itself is not a positive force upon Gibson's characters. It does very little to heal the

personal and societal trauma the denizens of the Sprawl suffer. Simstim offers a momentary

escape. It allows viewers to shed their skin and dull their senses. Simstim does not facilitate

communication like Case's art, or introduce its viewers to hidden truths like the AI's Cornell

Boxes. While Mona Lisa never moves from passive to active as Henthorne suggests, the surgical

byproduct of the Sense/Net industry provides her with a potential for positivity and healing. This

Simstim star surgery provides Mona an escape from her tragic life. Not only does she take refuge

in the visage of a famous Sense/Net star, she becomes a living work of art.

It is clear that Gibson is drawing a parallel between his character Mona Lisa and

Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. The parallel is much more nuanced than it initially seems.

Examining the title of the novel and the character of Mona, Lance Olsen states:

> Appropriately, the title of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* looks back to Leonardo da Vinci's 1503 painting that has become an icon of Western humanism, beauty, and pure art. Leonardo labored three years on this tribute to the wife of a prominent Florentine citizen. His subject's famous suggestion of a smile embodies Baldassare Castiglione's norm of aristocratic behavior, sprezzatura, a word that derives from disprezzo or disdain. As Frederick Hartt comments, this is not the condescending disdain for others, "but the serene unconcern about economic realities or financial display that often denotes inheritors of wealth and power."(4) Leonardo's Mona Lisa thereby displays disinterest before the commercial world. Gibson's Mona Lisa, on the other hand, displays the opposite. She can only conceptualize her world in monetary terms. By adding the high-tech word overdrive to the name Mona Lisa, Gibson disfigures and devalues Leonardo's icon. (Olsen, Mona Lisa Overdrive)

Gibson is certainly drawing a comparison between the character of Mona and da Vinci's *Mona*

Lisa, but Gibson is not devaluing the original per se. He is however using this juxtaposition to

illustrate the role of art and its relation to the human body in the Sprawl society. Classic forms of

art are foreign to our characters and rarely hold anything but monetary value amongst art dealers. As previously quoted "this is a world which relentlessly turns people into *things*" (Whalen, 84), *Mona Lisa Overdrive* shows us that one of those "*things*" is art. Whalen is correct to draw attention to the dehumanizing aspects of turning humans into materialistic objects. Yet, I do not think Gibson is robbing Mona of her humanity by turning her into a living work of art. By making her face a canvas, Gibson provides Mona a chance to reboot her life. Mona, starts out as "...an actress. Sort of an actress" (28), but in reality she is a prostitute locked in the meat of her body during sexual acts. Mona is given a chance to escape this life of abuse by agreeing to replace Sense/Net star Angela Mitchell. Both Mona and Angela (and Tally Isham before her) represent the pinnacle of fame in the Sprawl. In *Understanding William Gibson,* Alva Gerald Miller believes that many characters in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* "...seem mired in the world of simulacra and spectacle that drives the pulse of media and existence in the Sprawl. Angie, once capable of accessing cyberspace without a deck and interacting with deities, now has settled into an existence as a Tally Isham clone. Treated like a mere object by her pimp and others, Mona never really exhibits any sense of true agency. She and Angie both end up being pawns manipulated by more powerful players who are willing to sacrifice them in the service of the game being played. Mona, who already somewhat resembles Angela Mitchell, undergoes radical plastic surgery to make her a perfect clone of the simstim star. A person with little identity to begin with, Mona sacrifices her individuality to become yet another simulacrum" (79). Henthorne and Miller present conflicting views on simstim. Henthorne argues time and time again that simstim provides Gibson's characters the autonomy of an artist, allowing them to escape the passive roles of their past. Miller on the other hand, views simstim as an extension of

the characters' passivity. For Miller simstim erases any chance Angela and Mona had at attaining individuality.

Mona and Angela both remain locked in a passive roles when they ascend to simstim stardom. Mona trades one life of servitude for another admittedly more comfortable life of servitude. Yet Miller wrongly assumes that attaining agency and individuality is these characters' goal. Gibson is not presenting these women as failed examples of human autonomy. Angela and Mona are the culmination of Gibson's views on the human body as an active canvas. Mona is not meant to be minimized as "yet another simulacrum" as Miller states. She is a simulacrum in the same sense that da Vinci' *Mona Lisa* is a simulacrum of the his Florentine female subject. Mona, and Angela before her, have been turned into living works of art.

In *Count Zero,* Angela's brain was violated by her father when he installed a biosoft into her skull. This biosoft allowed her to jack into the matrix without wires and without a computer. This gift/curse allows her to be identified as artistic talent and the Sprawl's version of Hollywood assimilates her. It's not Mona's potential career as a simstim star that transforms her into an artist, like Henthorne suggests, it is the reconstructive surgery on her face that metamorphosizes her into a living work of art, da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* in overdrive. The term overdrive has two common uses, one mechanical, and one sonic. Given Gibson's constant musical allusions we can assume he is using overdrive as it relates to music. When a musician forces an amplifier or speaker louder than it can go, a distorted and fuzzy sound is heard. This sound is common with electric guitars in rock music. Gibson's wordplay conjures an image of da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* moving at breakneck speed surrounded by a cacophony of distortion, blasting through the canvas and onto the viewer's face.

Gibson draws many visual parallels between Mona and da Vinci's *Mona Lisa,* "It was Angie's face, framed by the reflected sunset stutter of the defective window….she looked at the face in the mirror and tried on that famous smile" (173-1744). At once Gibson is referring to Angie's smile and the smile in da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. Mona's face has become a surgical work of art, the perfect recreation of someone else's beauty. Olsen states "Pure art has become a sixteen-year-old nude dancer and prostitute from Cleveland, Ohio, who inherits the wealth and power of a simstim star. Pure art has become a pale representation of the genuine" (Olsen, Mona Lisa Overdrive). Olsen's comparison sounds profound, but does not hold up under scrutiny. The concept of "pure art" is not an important concept to Gibson. As mentioned throughout this thesis, Gibson himself uses references and phrases from his favorite books, songs, poems, and sculptures forming pastiche of art references. Rather, Gibson cares about the function of art, whether it be the old forms or the new. For Gibson's characters art functions as an visual object that facilitates communication and healing.

Mona is not a pale representation of da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, she is its futuristic reincarnation of it. Mona's face was the canvas and Angela Mitchell was the subject of the work. While Miller is correct that Mona sacrifices her previous life and individuality by being sculpted into Angela, her previous life as a prostitute at the hands of an abusive pimp dehumanized her long before a scalpel touched her face. The artwork on her visage allows her to imagine a new life, free from the abuse and trauma of the past. By becoming art, Mona has a chance to heal. This brings us to a theme that Gibson has been flirting with through *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*, but does not directly confront until *Mona Lisa Overdrive*: art therapy. Miller states "*Count Zero's* characters all had become stuck in one way or another; *Mona Lisa (Overdrive)*, on the other hand, focuses on characters that are damaged in some fundamental way" (79). I do not

think that the human characters in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* are any more damaged than the

characters found in *Neuromancer* or *Count Zero*, but art has a different effect on them. In

Neuromancer, art provides Case with purpose and the ability to form meaningful human

relationships. In *Count Zero*, art provides Marly with a roadmap to face her past and a

technological deity. In *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* art provides Angela, Mona, Slick, and Bobby a

chance to heal past traumas. Contrary to Olsen's aforementioned claim that *Mona Lisa Overdrive*

does not introduce new ideas, for the first time Gibson introduces the healing power of art

through art therapy.

      In "*Mona Lisa Overdrive* and the Prosthetic," Christopher Palmer analyzes Gibson's

damaged characters and identifies certain objects that help them heal. Palmer states "the striking

thing about *Mona Lisa Overdrive* is that so many of the characters are waifs, young and

vulnerable, deprived or bereft, and in depicting them Gibson sees things and other persons as

transitional objects or prostheses" (227). Palmer applies Winnicott's theory of transitional

objects and Kirby Farrell's (coincidentally, my undergraduate English Professor at UMass

Amherst) statements on prosthesis to his own reading of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Summarizing

Winnicott and Farrell, Palmer states "Winnicott's theorization of the transitional object is

different from what is usually implied by notions of the fetish or of reification; it resembles the

prosthesis as Farrell conceives it. Winnicott sees in the transitional object the origins of culture,

the imaginative use and construction of the world, and because this is something that Gibson

persistently imagines in his novels after *Neuromancer* (even the cyberspace jockey Case in

Neuromancer is ironically called "artiste"), most notably in terms of works of art and

environments, it is worth bearing in mind in connection with *Mona Lisa Overdrive*." (232). I

believe that Palmer's insertion of Winnicott's theory of transitional objects is a disservice to his

otherwise strong reading of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Palmer continues "it's also worth noticing that in the course of theorizing the stages from being merged with the mother through use of transitional objects to engagement with the world, Winnicott emphasizes play; indeed play and culture seem to be identified in his theory. Now, on his own account at least, Gibson is a playful writer; he is humorous, ready to take advantage of "gratuitous moves," interested less in conveying a message or point of view than in arousing interest by creating a sense of strangeness" (232). The concept of transitional objects appears easily applicable to the novel at first glance, yet upon closer inspection it actually obscures Gibson's core themes, much like Csicsery-Ronay's application of Italian Futurism does to *Neuromancer*. Gibson's characters do not transition away from art and into a new state of being; art is their final form, not a pit stop on the road to enlightenment. Art does not facilitate Gibson's characters to engage with the Sprawl, it allows them to heal from their exposure to it and ultimately escape the traumatic Sprawl society.

Palmer's argument about transitional objects and the prosthetic begins to unravel when he projects his theory upon Gibson's intentions. Palmer argues "the way the characters so far surveyed are offered as completed images may stem from an uncertainty in Gibson about the prosthetic. The kind of dependence and interchange experienced by these characters cannot be transitional, to use Winnicott's word. This would not be plausible, in a world of commodities, in which happiness and unhappiness are so thoroughly bound up with possessing things. Certainly, there is no norm whereby one no longer needs things as prostheses or transitional objects because one has moved on to a full recognition of the otherness of other people. People and things are not sufficiently distinguished in aliveness for that to be possible: which, after all, is the premise of cyborgism. But Winnicott also makes a connection between the transitional object

and "cultural experience which is derivative of play" (102; and see 106-107). This is relevant to an examination of Slick, the artist among these waifs" (235). Palmer realizes that the transitional objects he identifies in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* are not transitional at all and he lays the blame at Gibson's imagined uncertainty about the prosthetic. The prosthetic in Gibson's Sprawl can be something as physical as a mechanical appendage, or digital as a cyberspace deck. Gibson has explored numerous kinds of prostheses through these three novels such as Case's cyberspace deck, the AI's shadowboxes, Slick Henry's sculptures, and ultimately the Aleph. This exploration has been deliberate and methodical in its execution, Gibson is not uncertain about prosthesis in the least. Gibson views the prostheses at once as the corporate corruption of mankind, and its road to salivation. This salvation comes from a marriage of physical and digital art.

Palmer is correct to identify Slick Henry as an artist, although he is not the sole artist present in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, and the "waifs" Palmer identifies are in some cases works of art in and of themselves. Summarizing Palmer, Henthorne states "...Christopher Palmer indicates, they and the other traumatized characters need other things or people to serve as 'transitional objects or prosthesis' in order to recover (227).... As mentioned earlier, Slick Henry's kinetic sculptures serve as prosthesis for him, just as Cornell boxes do for the AI in Count Zero. For Gibson...art can be therapeutic (89)." Henthorne progresses Palmer's argument and by linking the concept of prosthesis to art therapy.

The character that best exemplifies the therapeutic effect of art in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* is Slick Henry. Slick uses the refuse of manufacturing objects to create art in the form of hulking robots in order to momentarily heal his physically damaged brain. Henthorne argues that this act of creation "presents Slick Henry's efforts to address trauma through creation of kinetic sculptures" (23). Slick Henry has been mutilated at the hands of the state judicial system for low

level offenses such as stealing cars. His memory has been taken away from him and he turns towards art to express his feelings and regain agency. This is illustrated in the novel when Gibson writes "Korsakov's they called that, something they did to your neurons so that short-term memories wouldn't stick. So that the time you did was time you lost….When he'd gotten out, when it was over-three years strung out in a long vague flickering chain of fear and confusion measured off in five minute intervals, and it wasn't the intervals you could remember so much as the transitions...When it was over, he needed to build the Witch, the Corpsegrinder then the Investigator, and finally now, the Judge" (77). The Sprawl's correctional system literally erases jail time from prisoners memory and the procedures unintentional effect is damaging the short term memory of the prisoner. Gibson has used the importance of personal memory and the trauma a hyper-techno-capitalist society instills as ongoing theme in the Sprawl trilogy, but this is one of the most direct cases of mental manipulation yet. The mutilation of Slick's brain at the hands of the state results in him literally taking his memory into his own hands. Slick "could remember every step of the Judge's construction, if he wanted to, and sometimes he did, just for the comfort of being able to. He couldn't remember when he hadn't been able to remember, but sometimes he almost could. That was why he built the Judge, because he'd done something-it hadn't been anything much, but he'd been caught doing it, twice- and been twice judged for it, and sentenced, and then the sentence was carried out and he hadn't been able to remember, not anything, not for more than five minutes at a stretch" (77).

Slick hates what his art represents, but takes pleasure in the fleeting feeling of wholeness they provide him, "Slick Henry hated the Judge. That was what the art people never understood. That didn't mean it didn't give him pleasure to have built the thing, to have gotten the Judge *out*, out where he could see him and keep track of him and finally, sort of be free of the idea of him,

but that sure wasn't the same as *liking* him" (76). Slick hates his creations because they represent negative internal memories that he has forgotten. His art serves as penance for his wrong doings, yet this penance is what allows him to regain momentary control of his memory and a feeling of wholeness. Slick's sculptures serve as a mental prosthesis. In this passage Slick's art becomes a prosthesis for his brain, "sometimes he just needed to stand there and look up at the Judge, or squat on the concrete beside the Witch. It held back the memory-stutter, to do that....So Slick had come down here to crouch next to an Investigator in the cold and dark, retracing all the things he'd done with so many different tools and where he'd scrounged each part" (206). Slick's memories of creating his art help heal the trauma the Sprawl has inflicted upon his damaged psyche. Without this artful prosthesis and it's ability to heal, Slick would be a completely broken and easily manipulated man, much like Corto in *Neuromancer*.

Slick Henry has a real life analogue named Mark Pauline. Miller states "Slick's character is loosely based on Mark Pauline, the founder of the performance art group Survival Research Laboratories, which incorporates robots and other machines into shows that eradicate the lines between machine and flesh." (77). Much like Slick's robots, Pauline's "are not practical robots, not servile room-sweepers or toadying floor-moppers, but multi-ton monstrosities, feral machines of metal and fire birthed from his idiosyncratic imagination" (Hicks, Terrorism as Art: Mark Pauline's Dangerous Machines). While their creations are visually similar, Slick's motivation for creating his art vastly differs from Pauline's. Hicks states "everywhere he (Pauline) looks he sees machines yoked to the banal — a jet engine, a backhoe, a pair of industrial movers — everyday technologies bored by their routines. He sees their potential, then sets to liberating it; he digs deep into the machines to discover what they really want to be. Five pulsejet engines become a pillar of fire called the Flame Hurricane. A backhoe finds new

purpose as the lurching, squeezing Big Arm. A mass of cable and tubing becomes the *Hand-O-God,* a great and terrible metal hand whose wrath strikes with eight tons of force. 'I build machines that have a lot of character,' he says, 'These machines, hopefully, have enough character so they can be used as actors in performances, and I stage public performances with these machines.'"

Slick Henry on the other hand is not liberating technology from their routines; he is using the gomi, the detritus, of the commodity stricken Sprawl society. Slick's materials have been discarded and forgotten by the corporate world, much as Gibson's characters represent seemingly non productive, or intentionally disruptive parts of society. Slick does not celebrate the awesomeness of his creations; he is ashamed of them because they represent his faulted past. Pauline lives to see his creations fight and perform while Slick looks away in horror; "he didn't want to look at the Witch, because there was blood on her blades and he hadn't made her for that" (298). Gibson was initially drawn to Pauline because of his adolescent zeal. Gibson states "Pauline's art feels to me like an extension of screwing around with dangerous things in your backyard when you're sixteen, loading empty CO2 cartridges with the heads of kitchen matches… I like that," (Hicks, Terrorism as Art: Mark Pauline's Dangerous Machines). However, Gibson ultimately repurposes Pauline's art and for his own prosthetic devices. Pauline's art and Slick Henry's art serve vastly different purposes. Pauline creates because he thinks "it's important that there are professional people working to inject a sense of anarchy into our day-to-day lives," he says, "I think it's more important than it used to be." Slick does not create for an injection of anarchy; he creates for some semblance of order. Slick's art is not a physical prosthesis like Pauline's, it is a mental prosthesis. Even though these robots are

mindless and hold no actual data in their cores, the process of creation allows Slick to recuperate from the trauma he suffered from the Sprawl's penal system.

Slick Henry and 3Jane emerge as the most prominent artists in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Even though Slick and 3Jane are vastly different characters with disparate backgrounds they have commonality in artistry and memory. As previously stated, Slick creates art as a way to reclaim his damaged ability to make new memories. While many of 3Jane's creations focus on transcending the symbolic immortality art naturally represents and transforming it into actual immortality. Both Slick and 3Jane are preoccupied with the preservation of their memories. 3Jane correlates Slick's works of art with her own artistic attempts at achieving immortality, "for 3Jane, he serves as the focus of a minor node of association: she equates his ongoing rite of construction, his cathartic response to chemo-penal trauma, with her own failed attempts to exorcise the barren dream of Tessier-Ashpool. In the corridors of 3Jane's memory, Angie has frequently come upon a spider-armed manipulator stirs the refuse of Straylight's brief, clotted history–an act of extended collage. And Bobby provided other memories, tapped from the artist as he accessed 3Jane's library of Babel: his slow, sad, childlike labor on the plain called Dog Solitude, erecting anew the forms of pain and memory" (286).. Each novel includes an attempt from the Tessier-Ashpool clan of obtaining a form of physical or digital immortality. In *Neuromancer* the family uses cloning, cryosleep, and Artificial Intelligence, in *Count Zero* 3Jane focuses on the symbolic immortality of art via many mandibled Artificial Intelligence and its own shadow boxes, and in *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* 3Jane's quest for immortality once again traverses into the technological with the Aleph. 3Jane is responsible for the Aleph box, a pure digital limitless universe closed off from the matrix. The Aleph represents the final effort of the Tessier-Ashpool's to transcend death. 3Jane uploads her consciousness inside the Aleph, but the

system is closed and her consciousness is isolated. She hopes to develop technology that transcends the concept of prosthesis. 3Jane no longer wants to be tethered to her flesh, but she ultimately fails because her drive is personal and isolated. She does not wish to form meaningful bonds or heal her consciousness like Mona and Slick. 3Jane only wishes to replicate her consciousness and this is why she fails. 3Jane and the Tessier-Ashpools represent the egotistical copying of the self. As a family they are a closed loop that grows in upon itself much like the Villa Straylight. This ties back into Case's vision of the wasp's nest in *Neuromancer*. The Tessier-Ashpool mirror this colony of near identical wasps building their hive away from society with no outside input. Gibson uses 3Jane illustrate the isolating byproduct of a capitalist society. Her methods to achieve immortality are not flawed but her self reliant execution is. The Aleph is not connected to a network and thus mirrors the wasp hive and 3Jane's consciousness becomes locked inside, reliant on physical outside forces for salvation.

The box shaped Aleph is not unlike the Cornell boxes from *Count Zero*, but this box of time and memory moves away from the symbolic and into the real. Palmer is on the right track when he states "perhaps the bareness of these spaces of art-making is a reflection of the problem Gibson has set himself: If reality is aestheticized, and there is no distance between the symbolic order and reality (see Csicsery-Ronay, "Sentimental Futurist," 224-26), then art-of the sort that Gibson presents as valuable-will only be able to exist as marginal, made in spaces in which one hardly has a life. Both art and junk can be opposed to the commodity, while they are in turn associated in the images that Gibson offers us. Gibson's thinking about artists and how they make art is an extension of his thinking about objects. The artist (in this context, the Boxmaker in *Count Zero* and Slick in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*) takes the ex-commodity, the commodity after it has been used, discarded, probably broken, and makes art of it-and not further

commodities…"(237-238). Palmer is comparing the empty spaces of the Tessier-Ashpool cores where the AI artist is housed in *Count Zero* and Dog Solitude, where Slick Henry crafts his robotc sculptures in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. In order to understand Gibson's intentions the reader must dissociate from the idea of physically valuable art. Gibson is not suggesting the art is marginal because it is made in dilapidated left behind spaces, rather art can only exist at the fringes of the late capitalist Sprawl society. To be any closer to the corporate saturated landscape of the sprawl is to lose meaning and become commoditized. Gibson does suggest that reality can be aestheticized. The line between symbolic order and reality is completely erased by the end of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. We will see that the symbolic order eclipses reality and rather than the symbolic representation of life becoming marginal, the physical existence in the Sprawl does. Art usurps the capitalist society.

Slick creates art with the broken remains of once functional appliances and 3Jane and the AI create art with from archaic consumer commodities of the Tessier-Ashpool family. These artists' pallet consist of trash. They reuse and repurpose the detritus of the Sprawl to create meaningful works of art. This trash art holds more meaning that the multitude of products used in its creation. The once functional commodities and machinery facilitated the isolation of the denizens of the Sprawl. They have become reclusive drones who plug into simstim feeds and shopping networks. Communication has ceased with their peers and prosthetic relationships are formed with fictional or heavily altered families via simstim shows such as *People of Importance*. Even Bobby Newmark "harbored creepy feelings that some of the characters" his mom "talked about were relatives of his…" (33).

Trash art is not just in opposition to commodities like simstim decks, it is an attack upon them. These broken objects refuse to be forgotten long after the Sprawl labels them as

disposable. Palmer states, "for Gibson, trash is a field of potential because it consists of things at the point in their histories when they have departed from the matte enclosure and symbolic dominance with which they enter our lives as purchases, glossily packaged, figures of likely-to-be-frustrated desire, offerings from a powerful system. Once that status has been eroded by use and waste, they can be recycled or reused. Junk is material, but is also a figure for the past, just as commodities, shiny and packaged, figure the new" (238). The Sprawl has no use for recycling these objects though, so it is up to scavengers and artists to redefine the use case for these materials. William Gibson answers the question "what if Rick Deckard created art out of kipple in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Gibson has utilized the idea of found object art in his exploration of the Cornell Box in *Count Zero;* in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* this concept evolves into gomi and trash art. The materials are no longer the forgotten objects of families or friends, they are the detritus of society that no longer have a function. Gibson uses the Japanese word for trash, gomi, to describe these materials. "'*This is gomi*,' Kumiko ventured, when they paused at an intersection. Rubbish. In Tokyo, worn and useless things were landfill. Sally grinned wolfishly. 'This is England. *Gomi*'s a major natural resource" (36). While Sally's comment appears to be a joke, it also illustrates Gibson's feelings about gomi retaining value because of the memories it holds. Palmer states the "cities in Kumiko's analysis of gomi treat the past differently in treating junk differently. If junk is pastness, then this must be an aspect of why making art out of junk is therapeutic for Slick, with his impaired memory. Yet there is nothing in Slick's constructions that resembles the relation to the past that we can discern in the Aleph with its nostalgic replication of everything...Somewhat unusually for sf, *Mona Lisa Overdrive* makes an allegory of modernity's loss of the past, and suggests how it can be adequately mourned"(238). While Gibson is very

purposeful in cataloguing Slick's materials and detailing their initial purposes, I do not agree that the mourning the past in on his mind. Referring to materials used in Slick's art, Gibson states "the chassis started out fifty years earlier as a remote manipulator intended to handle toxic spills or nuke plant cleanups" (252) and "Slick wasn't sure what the claws were from, maybe some big farm machine" (253). Slick primarily uses his artistic process and robotic creations as a very tangible way to heal his psyche, Gibson uses Slick as a clever way to comment on the destructive, and wastefulness nature of world run by corporate empires. The Sprawl and its global capitalist overseers accidentally attack human culture and the human psyche by flooding the world with manufactured disposable commodities. I do not believe the Aleph represents Gibson's mourning of the past, but plotting a path for the future, away from corporations that have created a world brimming with gomi.

In Gibson's Sprawl people are constantly dehumanized and turned into objects. Above I mentioned how the characters of Angela and Mona through surgery have been transformed into living works of art. Further, I argue that Slick, Angela, and Bobby represent human gomi and their artful union in and around the Aleph provides salvation to mankind. These characters have been disposed of and left behind to find new purpose outside of the "biz" of the Sprawl. These characters no longer support the Sprawl as productive members of society and some actively work against it. Yet, working against the Sprawl is in fact working for the benefit of all sentient life. Angela and Bobby become artful materials that reside inside Aleph box like objects carefully chosen by Cornell. Palmer states "*Mona Lisa Overdrive* is preoccupied with memory and loss, and the Aleph can be fitted into this theme; but it doesn't really seem to work as an image of, say, reconciliation with the past. It is significant that this is where the trilogy's dealings with the productivity of the matrix, its potential to generate its own persons, powers, and places,

have come to. They have come to a cul-de-sac. The absorption of some of the characters into the Aleph also catches something of the static way in which characters are drawn in the novel, each adumbrated by a range of prostheses that collect about them but are not really sorted through" (236). Palmer is incorrect with this assertion and presents a fundamental misreading of the text. The Aleph appears to be a closed loop at first glance. The consciousnesses of both 3Jane and Bobby are trapped inside the offline Aleph. While the Aleph is as large or larger than the whole of cyberspace, it is not connected to any network and thus unable to communicate with anyone outside the closed system. Yet the Aleph is only one piece of the artwork. Once the Aleph is plugged into the matrix, the closed loop opens: the system begins to heal the Artificial Intelligence that shattered into the loa and the boxmaker from *Count Zero*. The Aleph is not a cul-de-sac, it is a vehicle on a cyberspace superhighway that leads to new alien worlds filled with sentient life in Alpha Centauri.

Miller correctly states, "In this final chapter, the Finn explains that it was contacting another alien matrix that caused the AIs to splinter into the loa—at the time, they were unable to handle an encounter with radical otherness. But now the matrix is reaching out to this second matrix, which resides somewhere around Alpha Centauri. In the end, the matrix has healed itself by becoming ready to accept absolute difference and encounter true otherness" (81). The Aleph, cyberspace, and Slick's sculptures merge act together as art therapy that facilitates the formation of new meaningful bonds with human consciousnesses, Artificial Intelligences, and sentient alien life. It took the human and technological detritus of the Sprawl to heal the societally traumatized human mind and to heal the AI from the sublime experience of contacting an alien matrix.

One aspect that scholars seem to ignore is Slick Henry's crucial role in this process. Although the denizens of the Aleph are buckled up and read to communicate with an alien

matrix, the Aleph box itself stuck in the physical realm. The Aleph is fastened to the back of Slick Henry's Judge, "he was lashing two of the flat cells to the Judge's broad chest with silver tape. The gray aleph was already fastened to the machines back with a harness of tape." (302) The Aleph is physically attached to Slick's hulking robot and the system is completely reliant on the Judge's physicality and Molly's drive to find a power source. Interestingly the denizens of the Aleph, Bobby, Angie, 3Jane, and the Finn rely on the Judge as a physical prosthesis for the body, but the body no longer has any meat, it is entirely metal. Molly runs her finger playfully threatening to turn the power off and say "what happens if you just cut the power?" and then she says "Hey, 3Jane...I gotcha." (302) Molly finally has the upper hand on 3Jane, she literally holds her life in her hands. If the Molly and the Judge fail to reach a power source for the Aleph, all of its denizens will cease to exist and communication with Alpha Centauri will end. Humanity will then remain in its own closed loop left to build its own technological walls tighter and tighter like Case's vision of wasps.

Molly, the Aleph and the Judge represent a union of human prosthetic art (Molly and her augmentations), physical art (the Judge), and digital art (the Aleph and Bobby's manipulation of cyberspace). This union results in tangible healing for Gibson's characters and presents a potential elixir for the Sprawl society that has been poisoned by corporations and commercial commodities. This merging of artful realms represents a synthesis that Gibson and his characters have been working toward since *Neuromancer*, the balancing of the body and the mind, of the meat and the matrix. Slick Henry's Judge and 3Jane's Aleph represent humanity's last best chance for finding meaning. Miller explores this concept when he concludes "the fragmentation of these postmodern subjects is mirrored by the fragmentation of the AIs themselves. Wintermute's and Neuromancer's desire to achieve a union and complete themselves ended up

being unstable and leading to the fragmentation of their identities. This fragmentation also haunts the physical characters of the novel....The characters all seek wholeness in some way, as do the AIs themselves, who are moving toward a reunification. While some critics might maintain that the depiction of these characters signifies a nostalgic for modernist wholeness, it actually demonstrates how characters must seek value and meaning in appropriately postmodern ways. They must shrug off the modernist desire for an unfragmented existence and instead embrace fragmentation…" (79). Miller hits close to the mark but misses a few key points. Neuromancer and Wintermute do not shatter because of an unstable union, they shatter because of the immensity of contacting an alien matrix. The fragmented characters all search for personal wholeness and attain this unification through meaningful bonds with other sentient life. Some characters like Bobby and Angela shed the body like a shell to find wholeness, but others, like Slick, Molly and Marly Krushkova require the tangible nature of the physical world. It is the relationship mentioned above and communications between the digital and the physical that allow Gibson's characters to attain the modernist vision of wholeness. These characters may continue to be individually fragmented, but together they have attained wholeness by relying on one another and forming new meaningful bonds that will shape the direction of not just humanity, but all sentient life.

Chapter V

Conclusion

You know (what) is…stranger than having people do theses about your work? To have people build this demented shit that you dreamed up when you were trying to make some sort of point about industrial society.

—William Gibson, *Conversations with William Gibson*

William Gibson has been heralded a seer who has successfully predicted future technologies in his science fiction. Gibson created the term cyberspace, a place that saturates our daily lives. While his visualization of the cyberspace does not completely match the internet as we have come to know it, his video game inspired vision of the future hits close to the mark. With the advent of consumer virtual reality (VR) headsets hitting the market thanks to Google, Sony, HTC, and Oculus Rift, we are closer than ever to Gibson's vision. What seemed like a hokey vestige of Hollywood Science Fiction in the 1990's (*Lawnmower Man, Hackers,* and Gibson's own *Johnny Mnemonic*) is now much closer to reality. It is no wonder that most of the scholarship pertaining to Gibson is dominated by technology. Gibson's gift for predicting future technologies has jaded scholarship pertaining to him and obscured the original intent of Gibson's futuristic vision. Gibson is not concerned with the creation of new technologies, he is concerned with the negative impact those technologies have on humanity. Gibson chooses to use artists and their art to examine the terrible effects that consumer driven rapid technological growth has on society.

In William Gibson's Sprawl universe, the virulent growth of technology following a great war has destroyed old forms of art. Art has become commodified by corporations and artists are left without a medium, turning from classic forms, like painting and sculpture, to new forms such as hacking, simstim, holograms, robotics, and Artificial Intelligence. The works of art Gibson's characters create provide avenues for societal change and self-exploration. Case's artful hacks unearth his buried emotions and facilitate meaningful human bonds. The A.I.'s Cornell Boxes allow it to processes the overwhelming and sublime experience of communicating with an alien intelligence. Mona's plastic surgery and Slick Henry's sculpture-bots help heal their traumatized minds. These works of art aid the characters in forms of self-discovery and meaningful active communications with other sentient beings. Gibson makes it clear that industrial society is a threat to our existing forms of communication. The new forms of communication corporations invent isolate humans by dissociating the body from the mind and create passive communication experiences. Gibson's characters instinctively create art to form new active meaningful bonds but Gibson does not celebrate these new forms. They are presented as a reflex, a coping mechanism when presented with and overwhelming stimuli such as a hyper industrialized society. Art allows Gibson's characters to heal from their exposure to the Sprawl.

Gibson not only predicted much of the technology we use today, he predicted how damaging and isolating it can be to the human mind. Gibson's "conceptual hallucination" is very real, and we visit it every day. We're not using headsets to jack in to holovids (yet), but our main modes of communication are susceptible to hackers, corporations and governments through the guise of personalization and protection. Corporate forms of communication such as email, social media, and blogs and cellular calls have created a digital form of Foucauldian Panopticism. The general populous no longer feels free to speak their minds when interacting online thus creating

an inauthentic heavily manipulated experience. Human communication is morphing into a schizophrenic dialectic where no one person is the sum of their numerous screen names. Our doctored online personas serve as digital prosthesis that create a body/mind disconnect much like Gibson's online avatars. When ethereal media flourishes corporeal media becomes disposable. Gibson places great value on the importance of tangible media, authentic human discourse and physicality. He views the artist as a creator who facilitates human growth and the development of valuable bonds. Gibson composed his Sprawl trilogy as a warning about the degeneration and eventual mutation of human authenticity due to the industrialized commoditization of art by multinational corporations.

Gibson's solution to our modern problem is simple: unplug, meet someone and make something beautiful together.

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