278 pages of music, art, photography, film, and performance inside.

Featuring Paradise Lost (cover story), The Underground Youth, Paolo Grillo, SLOPE, Joshua Black Wilkins, Ductape, Matt Ng, Lucas Neagu (film director), Silviu Săndulescu, Die Sexual, Mathieu Ernst, Grausame Töchter, Simon Chang, Audrey Cordier, Anita Reix, Chris Hibberd, Luaty Almeida, Yasilda Slonova, plus exclusive visual series by Valeur and Marc T. x Andro, and many more artists from around the world. 30+ artists. 278 pages. Instant PDF download + flipbook

BI/ETTERMINDS ON ABSURDITY, TECHNOLOGY, COLLABORATION AND MAKING ART IN AN INCREASINGLY UNREASONABLE WORLD.

ARTISTS AGAINST the Reasonable World

Bi/etterminds brings together two distinct approaches to constructing a story: Minna Väisänen works with vector graphics, animation, sound design and comics, while Paul Hayes works primarily through writing. Their collaboration has developed over three decades, moving from early experiments with digital culture and Extropian ideas to comics, animation, experimental media and AI-assisted production.

They live in different Finnish cities and communicate largely through WhatsApp. Their work begins with observation, irritation, accidents and fragments of real life, and develops through an unusually persistent process of writing, arguing, editing, prompting, rejecting and rebuilding.

COLLABORATION WITHOUT THE LUXURY OF AGREEMENT

~~Minna & Paul:~~ We live in different cities, Paul in Turku and Minna in Helsinki. We rarely see each other and communicate almost entirely about animation and comics via WhatsApp. We have known each other since the 1990s, and both of us came away from our years in art school with the feeling that we had not received what we were entitled to. We tried, and we failed.

There were always people who could sense the insecurity and sensitivity of a young artist and exploit it: isolation, belittlement, the dismissal of achievements, and outright hostility. Eventually, we stopped making art and went to work.

Thirty years later, everything is considerably easier. Software, apps, AI, phones, the internet and computers simply work. We no longer need someone to open the studio door for us or explain how the technology works. Life has given us a certain amount of Teflon.

We primarily work alone. There is little point in making oneself vulnerable by presenting an idea too early, while it is still fragile or unfinished. At the very least, one has to choose carefully whom to show the work to. We have learned how to comment constructively, in a way that allows the motivation to survive.

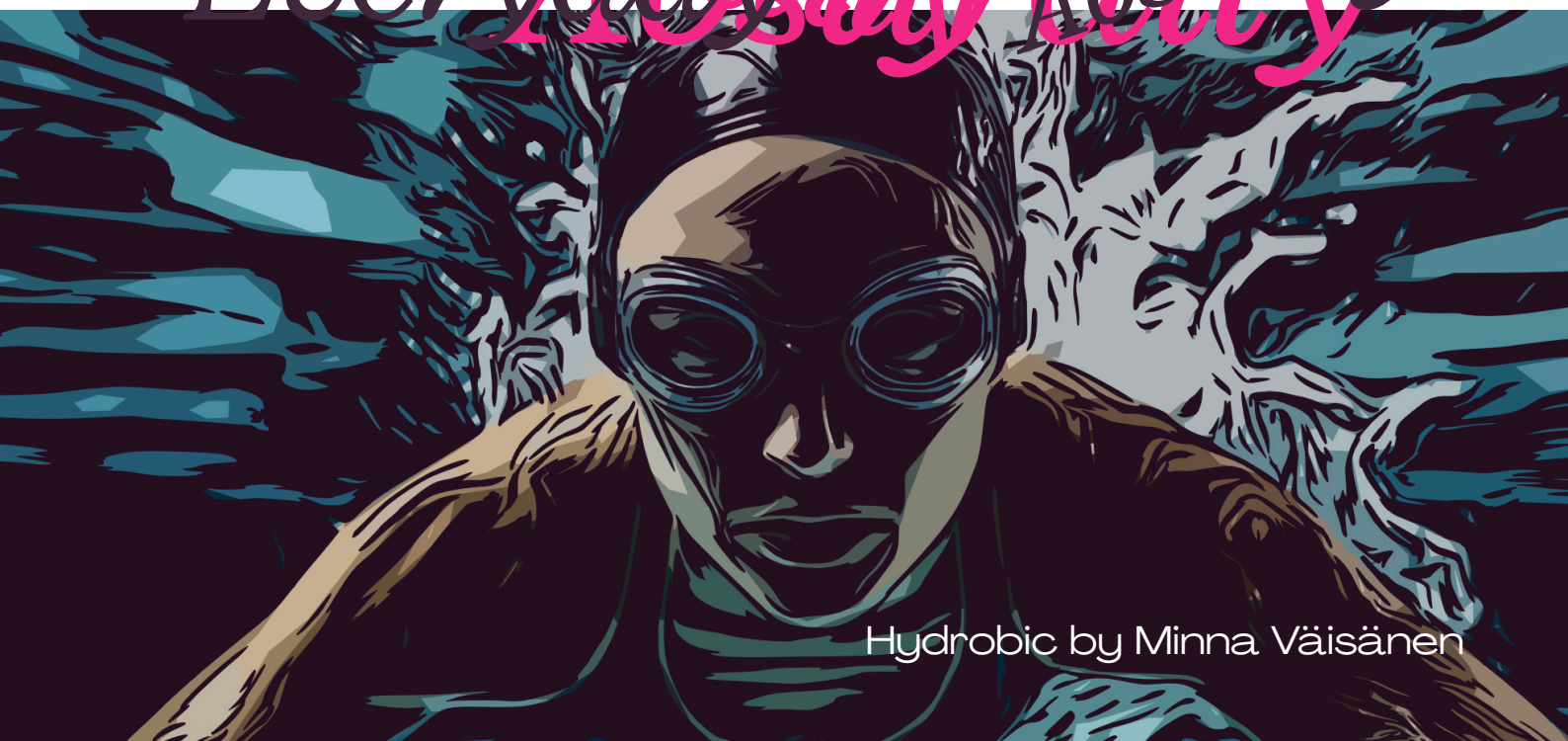
Animation requires a great deal of practice, so I constantly need new textual material to work with. My own life is not sufficiently interesting to me, although navel-gazing remains a perfectly respectable and surprisingly popular artistic genre.

~~Minna & Paul:~~ Most animations begin with something ordinary: a friction, an exception, a sense of injustice. Often the strongest results emerge from moments that happened to somebody else, while we were merely observers. Over the years, our brains have, in a sense, become synchronised and trained to recognise what works and to distinguish quality from visual noise, whether the subject is clothing, style, magazines or music. That makes our collaboration relatively fast. We generally know what is good, what works and what does not.

~~Minna & Paul:~~ We also make our own work because we need things that are entirely ours, without anyone intervening, advising or forcing a compromise. But Bi/etterminds consistently produces something neither of us would have arrived at alone. Working alone lacks the particular ping-pong of another person pushing the work forward. In practice, this means kilometres of WhatsApp messages and enough animation clips to fill both phones.
Layers accumulate, and the work stays alive for longer.

~~Paul:~~ Ways to Soar and Fall, for example, began with something I saw on my way to work: a man walking on the roof of an apartment building while gulls flew angrily around him because they had chicks nearby. The image stayed with me. I wrote a monologue about it, Minna developed some images and animated them.
~~Minna:~~ Eventually, one sound effect, a low industrial hum, became decisive, together with Johnny LaRock's song Still Here, which Paul suggested. Those two elements established the atmosphere of the animation, which moves between desperation and something approaching madness.

Everyday Absurdity



Hydrobic by Minna Väisänen

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF EVERYDAY ABSURDITY

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF EVERYDAY ABSURDITY

~~Paul~~: I'd say we've always loved absurdity in ordinary behaviour. Such moments aren't insignificant to me. They reveal so much about personal identity. Back when I was very young, I found my relatives utterly absurd. I was really entertained by their surreal behaviour and simultaneously terrified to realise I was related to people so proud of being lying, cheating, farting kin. Also, as I'm British, you begin to realise absurdities can carry much larger stories by the age of three.

~~Minna~~: Situationism and a comics diary course were perhaps the two things that finally shifted my attention from large narratives towards the small moments of everyday life.

One of the central ideas of Situationism is détournement, and it taught me to observe my surroundings and people's behaviour from a slight distance. Rather than inventing strange events, we can simply record what is already there and remove it from its original context.

~~Minna:~~ The comics diary course, meanwhile, forced me to regard ordinary life itself as material. One of the first comics I made with Paul was about a broken refrigerator. Paul happened to be visiting Helsinki, and together we dragged a refrigerator-freezer into the stairwell while waiting for it to be replaced. The first panel read: "On the first night, it wet itself."

Absurdity does not necessarily arise from individual eccentricity. It often emerges from operating within a conservative system. My personal animations and comics frequently depict bureaucratic, rigid environments in which people feel a constant need to demonstrate that things have been done correctly.

Extreme bureaucracy begins to generate its own peculiar habits and behavioural patterns. People learn to operate according to the logic of the system, even when those practices no longer serve any rational purpose. Everyone follows the rule, but nobody quite remembers why the rule exists.

Building by Bi/etterminds

In Defence of a Dysfunctional Reality

~~Minna & Paul:~~ If the world became completely reasonable, we would immediately become suspicious. Something would clearly be wrong. We both work for the city, which in Finland means operating within a bureaucracy whose institutional roots go back to the Russian imperial period. It breeds suspicion and cynicism, and forces you to question even things that were supposedly designed with good intentions.

~~Minna:~~ Practices labelled reasonable and correct are often the ones that produce the greatest headaches in everyday life.

Working life involves a constant degree of masking simply to remain functional. We play the roles of teacher, gardener, bus driver or president because the role makes the rules of working life easier to tolerate.

Since we cannot spend our working days behaving like the unpleasant idiots we occasionally feel like becoming, we are constantly looking for spaces in which our actual personalities can run free.

Ordinary life is much more interesting in its monotony than grand emotions and stadium concerts.

Elevating Serotonin by Bi/etterminds

Fine Art Fine Technology: The Fine Art of Almost Working

~~Minna:~~ One of my favourite things is technology pushed to the point of absurd dysfunction. Bus information displays, for example. Instead of showing useful information or the time, they flash, beep and display the eternal summer time.

When the driver speaks into the microphone, it does not work, crackles, shrieks or produces speech that nobody can understand.

A passenger boards. The card reader works, does not work, beeps, and the mobile app refuses to recognise the QR code.

The list is endless.

A beeping everyday life is simply our reality. We are too tired to question its logic or return to a functioning, human-scale analogue world.

~~Minna:~~ One of my favourite examples is a visit to a Polish spa hotel where men and women shared a changing room. As a Finn, I am accustomed to being naked wherever there is a sauna, but abroad I wanted to behave correctly. My first attempt was a complete failure. I wandered naked into the wrong places while Polish visitors laughed at the tourist trying to work out the rules. The experience became the comic Exposed.

~~Paul:~~ The comic explores that ageless fear of making an idiot of yourself while simultaneously finding another culture's ways more than a fraction bizarre.
~~Minna:~~ Small everyday situations can therefore reveal much larger structures at a meta-level. One strange practice, one form or one completely irrational procedure can expose the operating logic of an entire system.

~~Paul:~~ I love the friction between the two worlds. I love it when friends just chatting shit will blithely state, “AI is going to kill us all.” Then I show them The Benevolent and argue that it won't be machines or AI but us being dumb humans that gets us wiped out.
~~Paul:~~ The two worlds are more naturally connected than you think because the technology is inescapable here in Finland. But we do what we do to entertain ourselves. That means we're niche even in the land of the niche. It's good that we like what we do, but we'll never make money doing this. Though I think Minna might. Her solo work should be perfect for Finnish broadcasters.

~~Minna:~~ A day job as a media teacher is a relief for me. It keeps me grounded. Long holidays, financial security, up-to-date software, and the most critical audience ever.
We grew up before the digital world existed in its current form, but we have spent decades watching it transform almost every aspect of life. We also studied at a time when video cameras, editing systems and software were expensive and controlled by gatekeepers. As a teacher, I make sure those gatekeepers are challenged, ridiculed and, where necessary, removed from the way of young creatives trying to make their work.

~~Paul:~~ To be honest, I think our audience is young and outside Finland. We've been shown at festivals in Africa, all over Asia, the US and Australia. But we got cancelled in Finland.
~~Minna:~~ Some younger artists today reject AI and prefer to work with pencil and paper, or at most to draw “by hand” on a Wacom tablet. To us, this can seem rather amusingly retro. If there is one thing we remember painfully well, it is the slowness and unreliability of technology.
We have stared at progress bars and spinning beach balls, rendered overnight and spent hours burning backups onto CDs. You have no idea, youngsters.

~~Minna:~~ Life is short. Anything that accelerates the technical side of the work, particularly animation, gets adopted immediately. We are happy to replace cumbersome software that has dominated the industry for decades with lightweight apps. The entire Bi/etterminds production process can run on two phones.

I have no interest in the technical name-dropping that is so common in the industry unless somebody specifically asks. I have watched years of people painfully creating the same dinosaurs in Maya and Blender. They rarely ever become a film, a game, or anything that someone has not already done before.

It is extraordinary how much creative energy people can spend fighting computers and software.

~~Minna & Paul:~~ The collision between an older artist and new technology may produce interesting things, but for us AI is simply a tool. We have enough distance to recognise that every technological revolution arrives accompanied by exaggerated predictions of civilisation's collapse. So far, the world has apparently been destroyed by the internet, mobile technology, viruses and extraterrestrial life. AI is simply another version of the same story.

The more interesting question is not whether technology is new, but what happens to human behaviour once technology becomes ordinary. Comics, animation and experimental media have existed for more than a century. What we are doing is simply one small section of that much longer chain.

THE ONE TRUE DETAIL, EVERYTHING ELSE INVENTED

~~Paul:~~ When we first met in '94, one of the first things we did together was print out an Extropian manifesto. It was about uploading consciousness onto the World Wide Web. Identity, behaviour, surrealism, weird observations: that's always been between us. Most everything I write is personal experience for me, either encounters in real life or reactions to real-life events. For example, Golf Course is outlandish and prophetic, but it is based on historical approaches to gardens and landscaping by rich and powerful people. Sweets is a true story of an autistic girl and her bewildered father. Ways to Soar and Fall is something I witnessed from my balcony. The surrealism comes out because the Bi/etterminds approach to depicting reality is odd.

~~Minna:~~ I can identify a single point of reference in every animation that is real and personally experienced. It might be a feeling, a sound, something I witnessed, an event, or even a reconstruction of something that actually happened. Everything else surrounding that point is invented and constructed.

In that sense, the question is really about degrees of personal involvement. Hydrobic is rooted in a precise account of events at work, although from there the story rapidly escapes into fiction.

The Critic was particularly painful for me to write because it is a flashback to the 1990s. I did my Master's degree in Film Production, and almost 80 per cent of the text consists of quotations from two articles: an interview with a female film director and the critics' response to it. As a festival entry, it is practically career suicide. Institutions tend not to appreciate that kind of criticism. But as a form of self-therapy, it was genuinely cathartic. It gave me a way to say everything I had never been able to say directly.

The Year Long Golf Course by Bi/etterminds

~~Paul:~~ We are the authors of our work. Minna works fucking hard to use AI to depict original scripts and observations in a way that is her style. We had some fucker complain that our work used AI so it must be stealing from others. But that person was sampling beats from vinyl to make her music. The fucking irony. I argued for sampling back in the 80s when it was dismissed as plagiarism.

~~Minna:~~ Art has always involved copying, borrowing, transforming, quoting and remixing. AI forces artists to reconsider the idea of originality, which was already a rather unstable concept.

~~Paul:~~ We're not plagiarists. Minna will use Deadpan, our chatbot, and I will say, “That's shite. But let me run with that word or turn of phrase it used.” We try to be unique. We make the decisions.

~~Minna:~~ Being Finnish and speaking a language that almost nobody else does, I have spent most of my life translating in my head: music, books, the internet, almost everything. When ChatGPT was launched, it took only about two weeks before I was already using it in the classroom for scriptwriting and translation. I still remember the relief and joy of students with dyslexia who could suddenly write quickly and accurately.

Increasingly, the work is about how good you are at prompting. You can have one very good assistant helping with writing, dialects and research, and another handling voice-overs, lip-sync, animation and all the other tedious technical tasks.

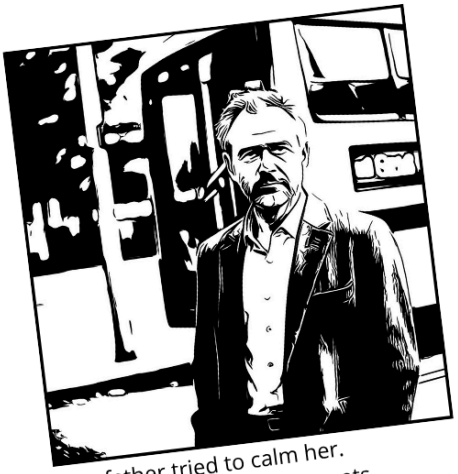
And, crucially, the tools are accessible to everyone. The technology is no longer something controlled by a small group of people who decide who gets to make things. That is a rather significant change.

~~Paul:~~ I don't know what art is, but I went to an Eggert Pétursson exhibition and the quality of his brushwork, the concepts, the textures, the thickness of oil on canvas giving light and colour. You don't get that with slop, either human or computer.

THE TOOL IS NOT THE WORK

At the market. A dad waited with a sad-eyed daughter.

She began a low, groaning, sobbing chant. "Sweets. I want sweets."



The father tried to calm her. Told her there were no sweets.

Her voice became an incessant whirlpool of sound.

She stood up straight and rocked back and forth. He sat. Trying to quieten her, he used words of logic spoken sharply.

Her obvious autism wouldn't allow such logic.

Sweets by Bi/etterminds

And, honestly, who the fuck is going to steal content from Paul's head?

~~Paul:~~ And we should not call it artificial intelligence. It is machine learning. It has a decades-long history of extracting knowledge from workers for nothing, then making people unemployed and making power and influence between rich and poor hopelessly one-sided.
Artists need better laws to protect their work. But so did translators and workers on assembly lines. We need stronger unions. “Creatives” need to realise they're workers and show solidarity with less glamorous skilled workers like truck and cab drivers, lawyers, shop workers and architects.

~~Minna:~~ The human brain begins operating through imitation at a very early stage. We borrow our first word from our mother and subsequently spend much of our lives quoting things we have already seen or heard. Creativity is, to a considerable extent, the recombination of previous experience.
When we make art, we reference and quote, consciously or unconsciously. We then call the result our own work. Good critics are often able to identify and name those relationships. What has changed is that AI makes the process more visible.
Previously, the gatekeepers were critics, fellow artists and audiences. With AI, the scrutiny can be even more explicit. Some competitions now ask artists to disclose which AI technologies were used, where they were used and how, sometimes requiring prompts and screenshots of generated material.
A prompt can reveal whether an artist has directly referenced an existing artist or used the voice of a recognisable actor. Style itself, however, is not protected by copyright. Nobody owns Cubism, black-and-white photography or a particular painting style.
In any case, directly naming an artist in a prompt usually produces a poorer result. The image becomes more interesting when the network of references is not reduced to a single artist's name.

~~Minna:~~ I have followed the development of Midlibrary.io closely, and I still use it in the classroom as an example of how AI systems can reproduce recognisable artistic styles. The site currently catalogues more than 5,500 artistic styles, including over 1,500 painters and hundreds of illustrators and photographers.
But when you put the original works next to the AI-generated imitations, I sometimes think: are they blind? A child can see the difference. The original has the decisions, accidents, materiality and history of an actual artist's work. The AI image has produced an approximation of its visual vocabulary.
And, honestly, who the fuck is going to steal content from Paul's head?

The Machinery Behind the Madness

~~Minna~~: A project usually begins with an idea, something we see or something that happens accidentally. Then the WhatsApp ping-pong begins and continues for what feels like forever.

I use Leonardo.ai to generate perhaps a couple of hundred photographs in order to get a character right: five fingers rather than four, and something that does not look as though it has just escaped the uncanny valley. If Leonardo cannot manage it, I hand the prompting over to Deadpan, our cynical and highly trained ChatGPT assistant.
Then I effectively copy and paste between one AI system and another, watching one attempt to correct the other's missing fingers, skin pores and various other failures.
Sometimes Deadpan completely loses patience and generates an image without asking me. That is when continuity falls apart and I have to put everything back in order.

I then select three or four images and vectorise them using Vector-Q to achieve a rough visual style. The aim is to remove the plastic, waxy quality of AI imagery and introduce some edge. Usually, more than fifty images of people are needed before the main character emerges. At this point, around 99 per cent of the material has been discarded.

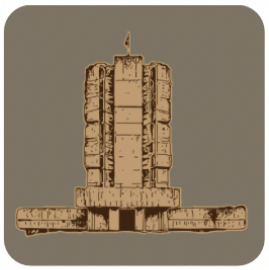
I then make either a comic or a storyboard. This stage is not strictly necessary, but I have noticed that slowing the process down gives the work greater depth. Because animation itself is so fast, I deliberately put time into pre-production.
I use Canva Pro to place the images on the canvas and usually construct the comic layout there. I then send the pages to Paul, who either makes suggestions or leaves them alone.

The comic images become keyframes for animation in Grok. This is my favourite and, unfortunately, most painful stage. I return to prompting, this time with dialogue. It is surprisingly similar to directing an actor. Instead of pulling a puppet's strings, you give verbal instructions. You prompt breathing, blinking, movement, emotion, dialect, background, pauses and words. And it still gets things wrong.

I return to Deadpan and complain that Grok does not understand. Deadpan produces an A4-length prompt and I try again. Sometimes a hundred times.
The result is a series of six-to-ten-second clips, until I run out of tokens.
Final editing, pacing and assembly take place in InShot. Usually, halfway through, I realise that something is missing to fill a gap and have to return to the beginning.

Then I put my noise-cancelling Sony headphones on and look for music and sound effects, using Pixabay or the material available within InShot. I also contact musicians directly, and so far they have all given permission to use their music.
The final audio mix is completed in InShot.
At this stage, I send several rounds of “almost ready” clips to Paul. If he asks to change the story, I refuse to start the entire process again. There was plenty of time for that at the beginning.
For accents, music and voice-over, however, I usually make changes. To me, those are simply another version of the same clip.
At that point, we usually let Deadpan write the synopsis, then edit it if it sounds too much like ChatGPT.
I make the poster, upload the film to Vimeo and FilmFreeway, and then wait for either laurels or rejection because “AI made it”.

Her father was broken. He begged forgiveness for his "crimes against life".



He could see no way to avoid an mass extinction event.

She decided to help him. Said it wasn't yet time to grieve.

She asked GAIL to halt and prevent eco collapse and make Earth sustainable for all life.

"If we die, you die!"

GAIL considered billions of scenarios.

Benevolent by Bi/etterminds

THE CRIME OF NOT USING AI

HOW TO GET DISQUALIFIED WITHOUT USING AI

~~Minna:~~ The protagonists of our first comics included Paul, Paul's ex-partner, children, his late parents and his sister. The following comic dealt with older people, Americans and colleagues. Then we moved on to public figures. From the very first comic, we have protected and concealed the real identities of the people involved. We obscure sources and avoid naming locations.

Initially, I used a service called This Person Does Not Exist, which generates an endless supply of fictional faces. Later, I began writing prompts for different image-generation systems.

We also use ourselves mercilessly as material, particularly when, after hours of prompting, two AIs still don't get it.

Paul is accustomed to messages such as, “It doesn't understand that the ten fingers have to be crossed,” at which point he calmly puts on the photographic shirt and sends a picture of himself praying, as in Building.

Paradoxically, the one occasion on which I used nothing but my own holiday photographs as the source material for a comic, Peephole to the Past became the first comic to be disqualified from a Finnish comics competition for alleged AI use, despite containing no AI-generated material whatsoever.

I submitted the original photographs to the jury, and the developer of Vector-Q confirmed to them that the software had not used any AI functions whatsoever. But because AI had been used in our other works, the disqualification remained in place.

The incident generated a great deal of discussion and placed us in the uncomfortable position of having to continually defend or explain how our work is made.

It also demonstrated how quickly AI use has become associated with technical or artistic incompetence, as though using a new tool necessarily means producing inferior work.

Photographers once had to explain the use of digital cameras. Artists had to explain image-processing software. Every technological change produces the same anxiety.

AI is still an extraordinarily awkward tool. In some respects, it is as frustrating as computers were in the 1990s. Back then, we wrote command lines. Now we write prompts.

The quality of the result still depends considerably on the person using the tool.

NOTES FOR PEOPLE WE HAVEN'T BECOME YET

Twenty years from now, we hope the joke feels completely outdated. That would mean something changed.

IF YOU COULD SEND ONE OF YOUR STORIES BACK TO YOURSELVES TWENTY YEARS FROM NOW, WITH NO EXPLANATION AND NO CONTEXT, WHAT WOULD YOU HOPE YOUR FUTURE SELVES RECOGNISE IN IT, A WARNING, A JOKE, OR SIMPLY PROOF THAT YOU WERE PAYING ATTENTION?

P~~aul:~~ I'd hope they would recognise that we were paying attention to what mattered to us: life, beauty, everyday human interactions, and the absurdity of being alive. Twenty years from now, I'd like to be designing parks filled with colour, shape and texture from trees, flowers, grasses and fungi, making art that celebrates life, and perhaps making a slapstick comedy film.
We probably don't express our most extreme views in our work. At least I enjoy my quiet life and have no desire to become a controversial public figure. We edit ourselves. We try to keep things balanced because we want our stories to have a life beyond a particular moment or political climate. We probably fail at that, of course.
So perhaps the thing I'd hope our future selves recognise is not a warning or a prediction, but evidence that we were paying attention. That we noticed the world as it was, and still found reasons to make things about it.

~~Paul:~~ Send all of them. Building is obvious because the story is thirty years old. All those people living their lives being under surveillance and in danger from a faceless enemy. I'd recognise that. My mental breakdown depiction in Elevating Serotonin. I'd recognise it, but don't tell me any spoilers.

~~MINNA:~~ I ASKED OUR SNAPPY, SARCASTIC ASSISTANT, DEADPAN, TO UPDATE THE GUERRILLA GIRLS' 1988 POSTER THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING A WOMAN ARTIST FOR OUR GENERATION AND THE FUTURE. THE ORIGINAL TURNED THE DISADVANTAGES FACED BY WOMEN ARTISTS INTO IRONIC "ADVANTAGES". OUR VERSION BECAME THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING AN AI ARTIST, DOING MUCH THE SAME WITH THE ANXIETIES AROUND AI, AUTHORSHIP AND ORIGINALITY.

Twenty years from now, we hope the joke feels completely outdated. That would mean something changed.

THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING AN AI ARTIST

We have already been accused of not making “real” art.

Photography was not painting.
Video was not cinema.
Digital art was not art.
Animation was for children.
Comics were not literature.
Every new medium has been accused of doing things the wrong way.
AI merely provides the art world with a new object onto which it can project the same anxiety.
We recognise the pattern.

The tool is not the work.

Nobody asks a painter to explain the moral character of the paintbrush.
Nobody disqualifies a photographer because the camera contains technology.
Nobody claims a film editor made a film simply because they used editing software.
The tool does not determine the intention.
The artist does.

We are not interested in proving that we can suffer correctly.

There is a peculiar prestige attached to difficulty in art.
The longer it takes, the more serious it must be.
The more expensive the equipment, the more legitimate the work.The more technically complicated the process, the greater the artist.We reject this logic.
We have spent enough of our lives doing unpaid labour, invisible labour and unnecessary labour.
If a machine can remove ten hours of tedious work, we will let it.We would rather spend those ten hours thinking.

We know that originality is mostly a polite fiction.

The skill is found in selection, direction, editing, rejection, sequencing, timing, writing, visual judgement, continuity, sound and knowing when something is wrong.

Every artist borrows. Every artist absorbs. Every artist is contaminated by everything they have seen.
The human brain itself is a remixing machine.
Generating an image is easy.
Getting the right image is not.

We are not asking AI to make our art.

We are asking it to help us make our decisions visible.
The important part is still human:
the observation,
the irritation,
the memory, the joke,
the contradiction,
the uncomfortable detail,
the decision to keep one image and destroy fifty others.
AI can generate an imaginary person.
It cannot decide why that person should exist.

Being underestimated has practical advantages.

When people assume that your work is amateurish, marginal, decorative, domestic or insignificant, you acquire a certain freedom.
You can experiment. You can fail.
You can make strange things. You can build your own audience.
You can work without waiting for institutional approval.
You can make the work first and explain it later.
This is not a disadvantage.
It is an excellent working position.

7

"This is a printout of all my prompts and their technical details."
IT'S HEAVY
PRINTER
"use it to burn the witch!"

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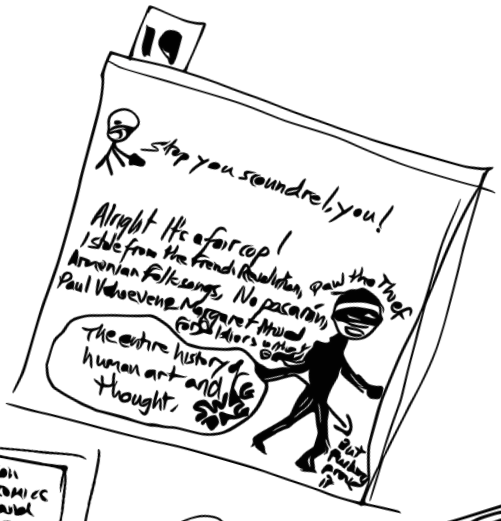
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