Technology and still life *†

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Megalography is the depiction of those things in the world which are great – the legends of the gods, the battles of heroes, the crises of history. Rhopography (from rhopos, trivial objects, small wares, trifles) is the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that ‘importance’ constantly overlooks. (Bryson, 1990: 61)

Meyer Schapiro has written of Cézanne’s table as though it were an island, but it must be added that it is an island without an ecology of its own, an island onto which a certain set of unconnected objects and fragments have been, over time, shipwrecked. The artist working with the limited island-like world becomes a Robinson Crusoe figure, making his word out of the seeds and parts from which only fragments have been recovered. (Fisher, 1991: 218)

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† We would like to thank Ruth Benschop, Michel Callon, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Annemarie Mol, Rolland Munro, Marilyn Strathern, Sharon Traweek and Helen Verran for creating the intellectual and political space in which the paper has been written. [Editor’s note: this is the acknowledgment as it appears in the 1995 working paper.]
These two citations are connected. Grand story-telling, and the world-building of Robinson Crusoe. They are connected through the character of material arrangements. Or technologies. To show why this is the case we start with a story. It is a story about an expresso machine. About a failing expresso machine. A stupid story. Because every time we want to make a cup of coffee we have to stand over the machine. We have to take the oven cloth, and fiddle with the screw cap on the top. If we don’t do this steam hisses out like a geyser. It’s heating up the plastic so much that this is now starting to discolour and distort. But if we use the oven cloth to fiddle with the screw cap then sometimes – the proportion of cases is falling – the plastic seal will pop shut. Then, though our hands have to get too hot, the column of steam is reduced to a few wisps, and the pressure builds up enough inside the machine to heat the milk and make coffee.

This is not a good advertisement for consumer technology. Looking at the device, someone says that as machines go it’s a real Tolstoy. By which they mean that there is a lot to tell about it. Indeed, too much. A long story. Or, as we might say (misusing Lyotard) a grand narrative. So we are in the presence of megalography. About the machine and its workings. A narrative about a mechanism that is told not as an abstract exercise in philosophy or history of technology, but rather has to do with the practice of making coffee. In short, in order to persuade the machine to work it’s necessary to perform that narrative. To perform megalography.

So the connection between the two citations is this. Within what we may call ‘the modern world’, once a technology has been successfully built, there is little more to be said. And that is Crusoe’s project. To order his world. To build it successfully. To create an ‘unassuming material base’. To make a world fit for rhopography rather than megalography. For working technologies and megalography do not mix. Except, perhaps, in the form of the tales of the heroic deeds of the founding fathers. The Robinson Crusoes, the precursors of rhopography.

But what is the character of the mundane? The materially mundane? The technological base on which we all depend? This technological base which is essentially uninteresting? This is the topic of the paper. And it is a topic that
I tackle obliquely, by talking of art and art history. For there is a tradition in high art that deals with the mundane. And that is the tradition of the still life.

So in the paper I explore the character of four still life paintings – by Bailly, Bonvin, Chardin and Cézanne. The first three allow me to paint a picture of technology in its modernist dimensions: to make sense of some of the arrangements that it embodies and performs. The fourth, a discussion of Cézanne, is a little different. For Cézanne, I argue, begins to pose questions that are the questions of postmodernism. And his approach to still life opens out problems to do with the character of contemporary and future technologies that are quite unresolved. About the possible character of technology that escaped from both megalography and rhopography. So it is that I conclude the paper with questions rather than with answers.

**Exhibit 1: David Bailly, ‘Still Life’ (1651)**

What is ‘still life’? This is a controversial question. The art historian Norman Bryson (1990) debates it in the opening pages of his book *Looking at the overlooked*. Arguably, he says, it’s simply a category pasted on to a variety of quite different traditions – an argument that might also be applied to the category of ‘technology’ if we were to stop to think, for instance, about the relationship between a box of matches, a nuclear warhead and a sewage treatment plant. But, says Bryson of still life, one way forward is to think of the latter as a form of painting that deals with mundane, everyday, and domestic objects. Objects that one might accumulate in the home.

The first exhibit, by the Dutch painter David Bailly, is not a pure still life (image 1). For several reasons. Most obviously, it shows a young man sitting at a table on which there is a variety of more or less common household objects – or at least objects that might conceivably have been found in a Bourgeois 17th Century Dutch house. But a still life would not normally include a depiction of a person. Following the art historian Svetlana Alpers we learn that the link between the person and the picture is complicated (Alpers, 1989). The young man in the picture is Bailly himself, the artist. But it is, as it were, a Bailly in retrospect, for the picture was painted towards the end of the artist’s life. Thus the subject is holding a portrait, but it is a portrait of himself.
many years on. And (this is the still-life part of the painting) he is surrounded by objects that celebrate, or otherwise represent, episodes in his life. What, then, should we make of this?

![Image 1: David Bailly ‘Still Life’ (1651)](image1)

The brief account of this portrait (see, for instance, Schneider, 1994: 82-83), is that this is a *vanitas* – that is, a pictorial depiction of the transience and futility of human life and human endeavour. And there are indeed many features in this self-portrait that draw on this tradition. For instance the soap bubbles which symbolise the momentary character of being. And, again, the various objects lying on the table, which represent the accomplishments that will be, or have been, passingly achieved by the artist in the course of his life. Which will turn to nothing in the face of the eternity confronting the immortal soul of the artist.

But what of those objects? For it is these which qualify the painting as a ‘still life’. Alpers writes:

> A young artist, identified as such by the maulstock resting in his hand, sits beside a table on which is strewn a crowded offering of objects. We can call it an assemblage of materials made by nature and worked on by man. (Alpers, 1989: 103)

Wood, paper, glass, metal – there are objects made of these and many other materials. But the relationship between the objects and the person is close. For it is not just, as we noted above, that they stand for episodes in the artist’s
life or his mortality. In addition, they show the signs of human activity. Alpers has a theory about this. She argues that the effects of human ‘working on’ them help, in a Baconian version of the relation between the human and his/her environment, to reveal the nature of the substances or materials of the world: the fact that (for instance) paper curls, or that pearls are polished. Thus she argues that: ‘Art does not simply imitate nature, nor is it a play of the imagination, but rather it is the techne or craft that enables us, through constraint, to grasp nature’ (ibid.: 103-104).

Commentary 1: The hand-made space

Alpers is making a specific argument about a very specific form of still life. As we have just noted, she is suggesting that Bailly is painting within a Baconian tradition which characterises much 17th Century Netherlandish art. But much of what she says applies to other forms of still life.

So what, then, are the commonalities? Meyer Schapiro writes as follows:

Still life ... consists of objects that, whether artificial or natural, are subordinate to man as elements of use, manipulation and enjoyment; these objects are smaller than ourselves, within arm’s reach, and owe their presence and place to a human action, a purpose. They convey man’s sense of his power over things in making or utilising them; they are instruments as well as products of his skills, his thoughts and appetites ... They are the themes par excellence of an empirical standpoint wherein our knowledge of proximate objects, and especially of the instrumental, is the model or ground of all our knowledge. (Schapiro, 1978: 19)

Schapiro is writing in particular about 20th Century art, and in the context of Netherlandish painting covers a little too much ground. Nevertheless, his insistence on proximity, manipulation, and purpose, are all crucial. Indeed, it is difficult to disentangle them, so closely are they related. One of the themes with which we need to develop out of this is made explicit by Philip Fisher. This is that the arrangements of still life are about hand-made space (the term derives from Fisher, 1991). Thus Fisher writes:

The still-life ... is the product of a space defined prior to the act of painting, and act of arrangement which is necessarily an action based on the cooperation of the eye and the hand. Each object has been picked up, brought to the scene and set in place by an act of choice. (Fisher, 1991: 202)
There are problems with his particular form of words, and he is thinking, in particular, of the growth of the still life as an art form in the last 100 years. But what he says is important.

1) Both he and Schapiro are talking about the arrangement of objects. Or, as Alpers puts it, an assemblage – which is perhaps the more interesting term given its poststructuralist overtones. Here, then, is my first suggestion about technology. This it may be understood as a close-packed assemblage of objects – or, as Alpers puts it, a ‘crowded offering’.

2) But there is nothing random about the arrangement. In the Bailly we witness an intentional or motivated arrangement of objects. It is, as it were, a retrospect on the artist. That is also a vanitas. With the conventional skull emphasising transience on the one hand. And such objects as a Venetian sculpture, which reminds the knowledgeable viewer of events from his life such as his journey to Italy on the other. Intentions or motivations thus pervade the picture. And, I would suggest, intentions persuade, inform, and are informed by the assemblages of technology.

3) There is a close relationship between the body and those objects. This is a part of Schapiro’s argument: that within the still-life tradition, objects are within reach of the human body. The ornaments are close, but so also are the tools – for instance the artist’s stick, the candle, and his pipe. Accordingly, the body and its penumbra of objects is a particular assemblage or arrangement. Which is, I suggest, a third feature of technology. That it is an assemblage in the form of a hand-made space (Fisher, 1991). That is, it is a body-sized arrangement that (I will suggest below) also extends, incorporates, and works on the body (Baxendall, 1985).

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1 See Deleuze and Guattari (1988). For further discussion of descriptive assemblage which draws on and extends Alpers to explore representational spatiality, see Benschop and Law (1995).

2 And, indeed, the explicit exploration of the hand-made space is one of the most distinctive features of the Bailly. By showing the artist together with his artefacts,
4) Consider, again the stick, the candle, the pipe, the knife, the woodwind instrument, the glass. And, in particular, on the fact that these are (to repeat Schapiro) ‘instruments as well as products of his skills, his thoughts and appetites’. This is a rich theme. Thus it points back to the question of motivations and intentions. But it also points to the close relationship between the body and the tools that surround it. The body and its tools, these are related. But what might we make of this? One way of putting it would be to say that the body is incomplete. And this is my fourth point. The reach of the body is limited by the length of the arm. It cannot see in the dark. It cannot hold burning tobacco in its mouth. It cannot cut paper or cheese. Its ability to make music or cup water to its mouth is limited. By itself. But when it is joined with the tools and instruments depicted then this is no longer the case. The body is, as it were, extended. What was incomplete is rendered complete. Which is, I suggest, another feature of the technological assemblage. That it strives to complete the body. To bridge the gap between intention and the hand. Or, to put it more conventionally, between grasp and reach.

5) What, then, is the body? What is the human being? Bailly, most likely intentionally, offers an answer. In earthly terms the human being is a product not only of the body, but also (or even rather) of the arrangements that surround it. We recognise Bailly (and, perhaps, Bailly recognises himself) in the artefacts with which he surrounds himself in the still life. The message is that they reflect – in some sense they are – the artist himself. Themes in social theory suggest themselves. Cooley’s notion of the ‘looking glass self’. Or the post-structuralist and actor-network interest in agency: that this is a distributed matter, something located through a more or less

the painting precisely witnesses the proximal arrangement of objects that frames (but is concealed from direct view) in most still life paintings. There are, however, many other hybrid forms. Consider, for instance, the Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin picture ‘A Lady Taking Tea’ discussed at length in Baxendale (1985).
hazardously assembled set of materials. But the point we need to stay with here is that the technological assemblage not only extends but also works on the body. Or, to put it a little differently, the body too is part of the assemblage, subject to changes as the hand made space also changes.

6) But there is something else here. Remember that Bailly is painting in part within the tradition of the vanitas. A biblical idea which argues that the idea of earthly completion is an error. That it is precisely that, a vanity, and illusion. That the appearance of achievement will disappear. That the subject will dissolve. That we will dissolve along with the bits and pieces that we have assembled. We may not share this biblical version of subject dissolution. But it is nonetheless important to our understanding of technology. For what we are learning is that technological assemblages do not stay in place all by themselves. That they are better understood as processes rather than as objects.

Exhibit 2: François Bonvin, ‘Still Life with Book, Papers and Inkwell’ (1876)

The second still life is by François Bonvin and it takes us from the Netherlands of the 17th Century to 19th Century France (image 2). The National Gallery Catalogue tells us that:

For an exemplary study in the actor-network tradition, which treats Louis Pasteur as a strategic assemblage of different elements, see Latour (1988). A similar idea, this time detached from the human, is explored in Lyotard (1991).

One way of putting it is to say that we are learning about the entropic character of ordering. That matters, the arrangements that make up the person, her hand made space, will dissolve, disperse. Indeed, it is interesting to imagine the Bailly painting in that way as one moves to the right from the young man on the left to his older portrait and the symbols of his achievement on the other: as a struggle between ordering on the one hand, and an increase in entropy on the other. Note also, that the argument about process is developed at length for social ordering in Law (1994), and is also a pervasive theme in actor-network theory. See, for instance, Callon (1986) and Law (1986).
Bonvin’s still lifes are almost invariably composed of humble, everyday objects and deliberately invoke the precedent of Dutch seventeenth-century still lifes as well as the art of Chardin. (Baker and Henry, 1995: 50)

We will come to Chardin a little later. But what of the Bonvin? This shows, as the title suggests, books, papers, and an inkwell. All of these are lying on the horizontal surface of a table, of which we see a part. In addition, there is an inkpot with two quill pens. There is what appears to be a scroll or a rolled-up document. There is a pair of reading glasses that have been inserted into the book, possibly as a bookmark (though there also seems to be a proper bookmark). In addition, there is a larger book that is possibly a notebook. This, too, has some kind of marker, but its most prominent feature (which is emphasised by the fact that it is at the front of the painting, and in full light) is the way in which its pages, or some of them, are folded and somewhat dog-eared. And finally there is a pair of gold coins.

As is often the case in still life, there is no background. Or, rather, the background to the painting is dark. Dimly we see the edge of the table facing away from the viewer. But beyond that there is murk. There is no depth. Depth, as it were, beyond the reach of the arm, the hand-made space, is not needed. Would be a distraction. And the light, which I have already mentioned, shines steadily on the middle front of the picture. And, in particular, on the notebook, the text (which rests on the notebook), and on the spectacles.
Again as is conventional in still life, the objects are very carefully arranged. The Dutch mimicry is evident. But there is one apparent incongruity: the presence of the coins. Why are they there? Or, perhaps better, why are they incongruous? My answer, which is also the key to our sense of the significance of this painting, is that everything else that is depicted has to do with reading and writing. Quite directly. For we understand that the still life is a composition that reflects a man of letters. We see the tools of reading. And the tools of writing. Both of these are there. Which thus perhaps means, bearing in mind the composition, that we are supposed to understand that the absent subject (for this time the subject is absent) has laid down the tools of his literary trade for a moment only. Has left them quite casually. As if he were likely to return, to take his reading glasses from within the volume, and take up again the task of reading, note-taking and writing, at the place where he had left off.

**Commentary 2: Tabular vision**

Norman Bryson writes as follows:

> Still life is in a sense the great anti-Albertian genre. What it opposes is the idea of the canvas as a window on the world, leading to a distant view. Although its techniques assume a mastery of perspective ... nevertheless perspective’s jewel – the vanishing point – is always absent. Instead of plunging vistas, arcades, horizons and the sovereign prospect of the eye, it proposes a much closer space, centred on the body. Hence one of the technical curiosities of the genre, its disinclination to portray the world beyond the far edge of the table. (Bryson, 1990: 71)

This certainly catches much that is important about the Bonvin. For we may imagine two kinds of space. The perspectival space that extends, as they say, as far as the eye can see. And a body space – or now, I might add, a technological space or technological assemblage – that extends only as far as the hand may reach. Into the assemblage of close-packed elements which, we have learned, make up the body and its immediate circumstances. But then there is this seeming incongruity. That still life is a visual medium. Perhaps, then, the objects we see are the objects known to the hand. Within the space of the body. Manipulable. As forms that may be rotated (an argument
developed in Bryson, 1990: 72ff). This is implied in our understanding of the Bailly. But, here is the incongruity: they are also *objects in a field of vision*.

The apparent incongruity is heightened by Bonvin’s choice of subject matter. For it is precisely *about* vision. About the relationship between the body and what, in its hand-made space, it sees. So what is the character of this hand-made space of sight? No doubt there are several answers. The lack of perspectival depth to which Bryson points. What he calls the ‘haptic’ character of the objects depicted. But there is another answer too, one that refers to the importance of the table.

1) **The table.** It is a little too simple to argue that the horizontal plane of the table dominates all still-life. But it is certainly right to insist on the importance of the horizontal plane of the table in the genre. Philip Fisher links this to his argument about the hand made space. But now our concern is less with the link between table and hand, and more with the relationship between table and eye. For Bonvin’s depiction is indeed of a table. There is no background. Depth there is, but only a little. No vanishing point. And on the surface of the table, other objects that have to do with the tabular, the flattened, the horizontal.

And, to be sure, the textual. He lays before us, then, the tools, a selection of the tools, of the tabular.

We are, or so it seems, in the presence of one of the great normalising technologies. Perhaps Michel Foucault is the key here. In *The order of things* (1970) he explores the way in which the table represented a major form of classical ordering in the 17th Century. And then, as in Linnaeus and others, the way in which it was transformed from table

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5 See Fisher (1991: 202ff) who, however, carefully nuances this suggestion.

6 Talking of the table, Fisher (1991: 202) writes: ‘The arm’s reach, its height from the floor, its extension down or outward, defines the tactile space of production; that is, a hand made space. Within this space we pick up, move, and assemble. Within this shallow bowl of space a few feet in front of the middle of the body, the hands and the eye are able to seize, to control, and to create order. This is the space of work and of direct human action’.
to tabulation. Foucault is telling of botany, but what he says might apply almost equally well to still life. Or, indeed, to technology. Which is my next suggestion. That the technological assemblage has to do with tabular seeing. And specifically about the formation of simplificatory, two-dimensional arrays that represent not only the table-top of the hand made space, but also link to the formation of simplified vision.

2) The eye: To make a table is also to make an eye. And Bonvin’s picture helps us to understand why. This is because it is self-referential. Indeed, it is a second-order commentary about the character of the power of the table, of the horizontal surface. For it is the depiction of an array of arrays, and can thus be understood as a visual version of Bruno Latour’s pun about ‘drawing things together’. But it is also self-referential in another way. This is because it also refers to the act of vision. The act of seeing. For there, in the middle of the picture, we see the spectacles. So what are they doing there, these spectacles? We know that they are marking a place in the book, and perhaps waiting for the scholar to return. But they are also waiting to turn the person who so casually left them back into a man of letters. The implication is that he (it seems probable that we are dealing with a ‘he’) cannot see unless he has the tools to see. Or, to think metaphorically, and this is my next suggestion about technology, that the technological assemblage creates a seeing place, an eye. Which is the vision-relevant version of the argument about the hand-made space: what we might, perhaps, call the eye-made space.

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7 Botany, Foucault (1970: 131) says, developed in the form of: ‘... unencumbered spaces in which things are juxtaposed: herbariums, collections, gardens ... the locus of which is a non-temporal rectangle ... this squared and spatialized development ... a grid of knowledge’.

8 See Latour (1990), where he explores the character of two-dimensional ‘immutable mobiles’.

9 Which is, to be sure, a further version of two arguments we have already made. One, that technology stands in an ambiguous relationship with the person. Indeed, that the person, is constituted as much by the technology as vice versa. And two, that entropy (the Bonvin again has overtones of the vanitas) is always at work. Here it is busy on the eye. And, no doubt, on the materials that surround
3) **Assemblage and context:** Finally, I want to make a general observation that applies as much to the Bailly as the Bonvin. Both of these are depictions of the relationship between a person and their environment. That is what the still life assemblage is about. It is about making links between the human body and its context. We talked of the completion of the body – its hands and its eyes – in the hand made or the eye made space. But, as a part of this, I have also argued that the assemblage re-works the body as well as its environment. But there is another way of putting this that is important if we want to understand the technological assemblage. This is that the technological assemblage *matches the body and its environment.* Spectacles make it possible to see. Books and tables make it possible to see further, beyond the room of the scholar. Just as the extension of the hand makes work possible, as it were by proxy, beyond the reach of the arm. This, then, is a crucial feature of the technological assemblage. Which may be expressed in a variety of languages. One is to say, as I just have, that the human being grows. This is the conventional narrative of the mastery of nature, the unbinding of Prometheus. Another is to say, as is common in contemporary social theory, that we are witnessing the contraction of time and space. Bailly travels in his picture a thousand or more miles to Italy. And forty years forwards and backwards. We do not know the time-space contraction implied by the Bonvin. But both assemblages match, and profoundly rework, the relationship between the knowing and working subject and its world.

**Exhibit 3: Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin: ‘The Smoker’s Case’ (1737)**

If technology may be understood as a close-packed assemblage which matches body and environment by transforming both, then we have still to

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10 The trope of space-time contraction is, for instance, deployed in Harvey (1989), but there are many others.
deal with the question of narrative: the relationship between the rhopographic and the megalographic. To explore this, let us move to the third Exhibit. This painting by Jean-Baptise-Siméon Chardin is called ‘The Smoker’s Case’ and is in the Musée du Louvre in Paris (image 3).

Once again this depicts a flat surface – perhaps the top of a table or perhaps the surface of a shelf or a sideboard. The background is a little more marked than that of the Bonvin still life. Here we witness an indistinct pattern that might be wallpaper, and a frame, perhaps that of a picture or a mirror, that rests on the surface. But the effect is similar. There is no depth to the picture, no Albertian vanishing point. On the surface we witness a series of objects. Two more long-stemmed smoker’s pipes. A wooden hinged box, the smoker’s case, which reveals a series of smaller containers perhaps made of brass. In addition, there are further objects which appear to have little to do with smoking. There is a jug. A small ceramic container with a top that has been removed. A glass and a tumbler. And a further small glass or pottery container.

These, then, are the specific objects that appear. We are witnessing another assemblage within the hand-made space of the body that has been arrayed for the eye on a domestic surface. But there is more to be said. More to be said about the still life as a whole. About the style in which it is painted. For the picture presents a slightly blurred appearance – though this is certainly not because it is badly painted. And the objects – even those which might be
expected to show sharp edges – seem to be in somewhat soft focus. Indeed, the overall sense of the picture is relaxed and easy going. Somehow comfortable. Indeed mundane. So what is happening? What is the artist doing?

**Commentary 3: The centering of mundanity**

Norman Bryson has a specific theory about Chardin’s technique (see Bryson, 1990: 90ff). He argues that Chardin, like many other still life artists, was faced with a problem. He needed to defamiliarise the everyday objects with which we surround ourselves (for why else would we even bother to attend to that which is mundane and look at a still life?). On the other hand, he also wished to find a way of painting that does not lose sight of the unexceptional and matter-of-fact character of those objects. So how did he achieve this? The answer is that he sought (to use Bryson’s words) to ‘cultivate a studied informality of attention which looks at nothing in particular’ (*ibid.*: 91).

But how? Bryson’s answer is that in his depictions he avoided priorities. Every part of the picture was equally important. The objects that are depicted. But so too are the spaces between the objects. And even the background appears, as we have seen, in its pattern. All have the same status. There is, says Bryson, no hierarchy in Chardin’s most accomplished pictures. Instead there is a blur, with no particular point of focus. In which the aim is: ‘to suggest a familiarity with the objects in the visual field on such intimate and friendly terms that nothing any more needs to be vigilantly watched’ (*ibid.*: 92).

The eye, then, moves over the picture. No, better, the aim is to construct a picture without a visual hierarchy, in a way that encourages the eye to move over its full surface. Without stopping, or attending specially to any particular part of what is depicted. There is, then, a theory of vision at work here. A

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11 Bryson links his analysis to the argument mounted by Baxendall in his *Patterns of intention* (1985). This relates the development of Chardin’s painting style to popularised versions of the theories of vision of Newton and in particular Locke that circulated in the early 18th Century.
theory of the eye. Of the movements of the eye. Vision is something that takes place in time:

It is hard to find before Chardin convincing evidence in painting of this strategy of portraying vision in time, as a narrative, and the presence of narrative should bring his work into the category of anecdotal or history painting ... But in these narratives, which tell only of brief journeys across a corner of everyday life, nothing significant happens: there is no transfiguration or epiphany, no sudden disclosure of transcendence. The eye moved lightly and without avidity: it is at home. (Bryson, 1990: 93)

But what should we make of this?

1) *Rhopography*: In the introduction I suggested that technology has to do with the creation of an ‘unassuming material base’. Which means that the problem for the technologist is related to that of the still life artist. Or at least, to Chardin’s understanding of that problem. We’ve just seen that this is to find a way of overcoming the resistance that attaches to the mundane. To persuade the viewer that it is, indeed, worthwhile attending for a moment to the everyday. That it is worthwhile telling little stories of domesticity, of hand made space. Whereas the problem for the technologist (as opposed to the theorist of technology) is to achieve that state of grace where the user has no need to perform grand remedial narratives in order to work the technology in question.¹²

But the difference rests upon similarity. Bryson, though he is not talking of technology but rather of Chardin’s still-life technique, writes in a way that might almost equally well describe the latter: ‘Tasks are not rushed: they succeed on another in a gentle rhythm of co-operation between hand and eye, in a low-plane reality of quiet duties and small functions’ (Bryson, 1990: 94). Perhaps the ‘gentle’ doesn’t apply to technology. Metaphors for the machine age rarely remark on the leisurely pace of the mechanical. But the rest surely does. Like still life, the technological assemblage is about little narratives (*petit récits*). Little narratives which, unlike those of Jean-François

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Lyotard, conveniently and efficiently integrate themselves together. Such that they become mundane. Rhopographic.

2) *The integrated assemblage*: in which case we have also learned something else. We have learned something about inattention and integration. For there is a model of attention here that relates the two together. Mundane attention is achieved in the unhurried move between components. Unhurried and unhierarchical movements. Let’s stress the importance of the lack of hierarchy in this. Mundane attention is unhierarchical in the sense that there is no particular point of attention. No particular focus for concern. The field of attention is, as it were, evenly distributed. As in the Chardin painting. Which means that there is no need for megalography to make the any of the moves. To bridge any of the links within the assemblage. That there are no troublesome gaps or dissonances. So the model of attention is a model that says that the integration of any assemblage is ensured in the rhopographic character of its links. Which is, however, also a model for the technological assemblage. In this way of understanding it, *the technological assemblage may be seen as a set of unhierarchical links*. Which, to be sure, is why our expresso machine is unsatisfactory.

3) *The bodily integrated subject*: Unhierarchical with respect to whom or what? This question returns us to the question of the viewer. For this model assumes an eye. Indeed, as we have seen, it implies a developed theory of vision. We have, however, no need to look into Locke. For the purpose of this paper it is enough to observe, as we have above, that the eye moves gently between different places on the table of vision, pressed from one point to another. And never finding itself under strong pressure. Which, it seems to me, amounts to a particular theory of the integrated subject. For, notwithstanding the arguments about drawing things together cited above, the eye is a point, a focus. It attends to one thing at a time. *It cannot attend to everything on the table at once*. It may compare, contrast, and judge. No doubt something like this is implied in the models of rationality dominant in the West. Or (as in the present case) it may move effortlessly between different places without noticing important comparisons and contrasts.
This, then, is a theory of the subject that is also a theory of one of the versions of still life. But it is also a theory of the technological assemblage. The technological assemblage also creates the rhopographic subject. Or, at any rate, this version of the technological assemblage, technology as mundanity, constitutes the bodily-integrated subject.

Where there are no resistances between places. All the links are easy. Nothing is highly charged.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Exhibit 4: Paul Cézanne: ‘Still Life with Melons and Appels’ (1890-1894)}

Let us summarise the paper so far. I have argued that technology may be understood as an intentionally performative close-packed assemblage. This creates a space that is both hand made and eye made, a space that matches the body to its environment by operating on both. To the extent that this is successfully achieved it constitutes what I have called a rhopographic subject by means of unhierarchical and unremarkable links. This is a version of the integrated subject in which there is an absence of special attention. Megalography is unnecessary. Indeed it is destructive of this form of subjectivity and the technological assemblages within which it is constituted.

This, I believe, catches something important about technology. It catches, for instance, our most typical attitude towards day-to-day technologies. That these are essentially uninteresting. It also catches something about technological innovation: that the best technologies are those that work, as it were, ‘automatically’. That require little attention. That are, as noted in the introduction, unproblematic means to greater or different ends.

But, if it catches something important about technology, it also raises some questions. In particular, we need to ask ourselves whether we are not at risk of assuming that technology is invariant: that it is everywhere the same, to be understood as a rhopographically integrated assemblage. Or, to put the same

\textsuperscript{13} This may, in part, be a way of talking of what is sometimes called ‘tacit knowledge’. See, for instance, the work of Thomas Kuhn (1970). It may also (though this is less clear) relate to the kind of perceptual scanning explored by Ehrenzweig (1993).
question in slightly different terms, we need to ask whether it is not the case that technologies have changed. As, for instance, in the condition that is known as postmodernity.

To tackle these questions, let us turn to the fourth Exhibit. This is a painting by Paul Cézanne that is exhibited the National Gallery in London, his ‘Still Life with Melons and Apples’ (image 4). This painting, like many others by Cézanne, depicts a mixture of fruit. There are apples, two melons (one of which has been cut open). In addition, there is a plate on which two slices of the melon have seemingly been placed. There is a ceramic artefact which might be a vase, or perhaps a tea pot. And there is a rucked-up cloth on which the still life objects lie, which partially covers a small table. The background is indeterminate. There is certainly no Albertian vanishing point, but neither does it clearly represent a wall or any other recognisable background.

![Image 4: Paul Cézanne, ‘Still Life with Melons and Appels’ (1890-1894)](image)

The London National Gallery Catalogue comments that:

The still life was one of the principle themes of Cézanne’s work. Using a repertoire of everyday objects such as fruit, jugs, bottles and plates, he experimented continuously with relationships of form, colour and pattern. The groupings can seem casual, but Cézanne is known to have taken great care with the arrangement, sometimes spending hours positioning the objects. (Baker and Henry, 1995: 108)

It goes on to describe the brushwork as ‘fresh and vigorous’, though also observing that it is uneven. Thus there are parts of the picture where there is
evidence of much work – for instance the slices of melon. On the other hand there are places to which Cézanne has seemingly paid much less attention, and which are covered with only a thin layer of paint – or indeed (as for the background) where the primer on the canvas is still visible.

‘Form’, ‘colour’ and ‘pattern’. It sometimes seems as if Cézanne is interested in surfaces. More interested in the juxtaposition of surfaces, of patches, than in the objects themselves. This reflects itself in his obsessional arrangement and rearrangement of the objects that make up his still lifes. And the way in which he plays with, and distorts, Albertian perspective. For, if Chardin and the other artists I have discussed, cut off the vanishing point with a background, then Cézanne is doing something more radical. He is, or so it appears, breaching the rules of perspective. Thus something very strange is happening to the surface of the table in this still life. It is, or so it seems, being tilted forward.

Commentary 4: Dispersion and reflexivity

What should be made of all this, his concern with form and pattern. With the destabilising of perspectives? One possibility is that we are witnessing the generation of a creative space that is distinctly aesthetic in character. I use the term ‘distinctly’ advisedly. For in this view the problem is that of distinction – of making a distinction between that which is functional (which belongs to the world of industry and commerce) and that which is aesthetic. Which demands, or at least suggests, a strategy which turns around the denial of the functional (Bryson, 1990: 81ff). Bryson, writing of another still life by Cézanne observes that:

The fruit are disposed with no rationale except that of forming the compositional armature for the painting. The table-cloth and linen have all been creased and rumpled not to suggest the aftermath of a meal but rather to display the fruit as aesthetic spectacle. (Bryson, 1990: 81)

The generation of aesthetic distinction is modernist trope and a persistent trouble for the fine arts.14 But more is going on. For it can also be argued that in the late 19th Century there was a sea-change in the nature of

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14 And one explored with great wit for American art in Chapter 3 of Steinberg (1972).
representation. Bailly, Chardin, Bonvin – all of these were engaged in the representation of an arrangement already given in the world. The eye, though constituted in part by that arrangement, nonetheless stood over and outside it. And, notwithstanding the absence of a distance-point, it presupposed a volumetric spatiality.\(^\text{15}\) But for Cézanne none of this is so apparent. Indeed, though there is an argument to the contrary (for, after all, we can see the fruit there, lying on the table, can we not?) there is also a strong case for saying that we are not here witnessing representation at all. Rather we are observing \textit{presentation}.

Presentation, not representation: ... what is shown comes into being only inside the picture. The integrity and separate visibility of each dab of paint foregrounds the work of the brush in building the scene, over the scene itself. (Bryson, 1990: 82)

In which case a space is being \textit{made}. And, to shift the emphasis in a topological direction, a \textit{space} is being made. Made advisedly.\(^\text{16}\) By an artist who is declaring himself to be a creative aesthetic producer. For the focus of attention has shifted. Painting is no longer ‘about’ features of the outside world. Instead, it is about itself, about the process of painting, the work of building up brush stroke on brush stroke. There are two accounts of this self-reflexive aestheticisation. One: that it represents a shift from a concern with the Albertian volume to the surfaces detectable within that volume. Two: that ‘painting traded in its preoccupation with a room-like space that had to be seen \textit{through} the surface, for a table-top space seen \textit{at} or \textit{on} the surface’. Which is to argue (following Fisher) that painting came to understand and experience itself as ‘the artisanal working space of hand and eye, the table top’ (Fisher, 1991: 197). In which case the struggle of modern art, in its aestheticisation, has been first to legitimate and then to explore the

\(^{15}\) Alternatively, if one wanted to make an ontological argument, one could say that such still-life representations performed a subject-object distinction implying a volumetric space of pregiven objects (or perhaps, in the Netherlandish case, surfaces). For this argument developed at some length see Benschop and Law (1995).

\(^{16}\) It is important to stress that this is a discursive shift in attention rather than a radical disjuncture in the character of art work itself.
possibilities of painting when this is understood as a vertical transposition of a surface of work, the horizontal work space of the table top.

This is a profound move, one which I have played on throughout the discussion. Our notion of the assemblage, and in particular the notion of the hand made space owes much to modern art, and in particular to Fisher's understanding of modern art. But what should we make of the self-reflexive aestheticisation of the working space? And what does it have to tell us about changes in the character of the technological assemblage?

Fisher writes:

Meyer Schapiro has written of Cézanne’s table as though it were an island, but it must be added that it is an island without an ecology of its own, an island into which a certain set of unconnected objects and fragments have been, over time, shipwrecked. The artist working with the limited island-like world becomes a Robinson Crusoe figure, making his own world out of the seeds and parts of a prior world from which only prior fragments have been recovered. (Fisher, 1991: 218)

Fisher further observes that the Robinson Crusoe fable has operated as a powerful myth in the West for personal/technological domination. Or, I might add, the optimism of the control-project of modernism: that everything is, or might be, subject to the control of a single centred agent. In which the world is turned into a resource, a set of bits and pieces to be juxtaposed, ordered, and mastered. In which the need for initial megalography is determined by the requirement for the later mundanity of unhierarchical rhopography.

So what does this suggest about the character of technology? I want to touch on three possibilities. The first is a move in the great modern drama of Disenchantment. The second and third take us beyond this to the renchantments of technoscience:

1) Technology and autism: The control-project of modernism stretches way back before the Enlightenment. Even so, it is instructive to compare the world as depicted by Bailly with that offered to us by

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17 This is a myth powerfully explored by Michel Tournier (1984) in his novel, Friday, or the other island.
Cézanne. In the former the limits of what it is to be human, to order, are quite explicit. This is precisely the point of the vanitas. Great forces will overwhelm the subject. And the recognition of this shapes the subject. But in the latter the limits set by the environment have more or less disappeared. We live (I use the gendered term advisedly) in a man-made world. So what does this mean?

Cézanne’s prolonged dwelling with still life may be viewed also as the game of an introverted personality who has found for his art of representation an objective sphere in which he feels self-sufficient, masterful, free from disturbing impulses and anxieties around by other human beings, yet open to new sensation. Stable but of endlessly shifting intense colour, while offering on the small rounded forms an infinite nuancing of tones, his still life is a model world that he has carefully set up on the isolating supporting table, like the table of the strategist who mediates imaginary battles between the toy forces he has arranged on his own variable terrain. (Fisher, 1991: 218-219)

Another way of putting this is to say that still life is in the process of becoming autistic. Or, less controversial: that it is self-referential. For, in Cézanne and his successors it no longer makes reference to an external world. Everything has been taken within. The environment has disappeared. The tension between the subject and its context which generated the hand made and the eye made space have gone. The creative agent is everything. The world has not simply been disenchanted. In an ultimate move, it has vanished. Which lesson also applies to high modernist technologies. Two moves here.

One: technological assemblages become an expression of the limitless creative capacities inherent in the human ability to master its environment. So they are the creations of great innovators. Or, perhaps, their successors, the great capitalist corporations. There is nothing that the creators cannot do. There is nothing that technology cannot do.

Two: technological assemblages have become self-referential. They talk to themselves. And they talk only to themselves. And they do so because they take within themselves their environments. The
Environment, capital ‘E’ becomes a global system of inputs and outputs that may be modelled and controlled. The preferred model for thinking about information and the design of machines becomes cybernetic. Desires and tastes are re-organised. Users, to use Steve Woolgar’s (1991) felicitous phrase, are ‘configured’. There is heterogeneous engineering – a term which neatly combines celebration of the modernist technologist with systemic self-reference.\(^\text{18}\)

2) The inhuman: But there are some interesting problems here. These turn around the character of agency. Above I have made much of the modernist trope: that the human can, by wit, hard work and creative power, master its environment. Turn it into a resource. This, of course, is the ultimate move in the trajectory of still life. The assemblage of objects was always, well, artful. But now the assemblage is not constrained by any concern with reference it is nothing more than the expression of the master. It is autistic.

Except this. To focus on the character of the work of the master, to examine the business of painting in its own right, is to risk raising questions about the character of the creative process. And this is what begins to happen with Cézanne. It is to re-locate him his place of work. To emphasise the nature of the materials that he uses. To raise questions about the character of his craft. And then, more corrosively, to start to explore the possibility that the process of artistic production

\(^{18}\) In the sociology of technology, the large systems theory of Thomas Hughes (1983) reveals the way in which a powerful systems metaphor swallows up independent referents by incorporating them within itself. But it is impossible to make analogous comment of actor-network theory, where it is argued that, from the standpoint of a specific network, there is no way out of that network. Thus Latour (1988) uses the metaphor of the tunnels of termites. Yes, networks are long and thin. They do not go everywhere. But it is also impossible to imagine ways of escaping them. Haraway (1991a) makes analogous observations about biological metaphors - and the way in which, as currently used, they erode boundaries between inside and outside the organism. Finally, Knorr-Cetina (1995), talking of forms of research in the natural sciences, observes the way that in high energy physics the external world is domesticated within an epistemic régime that makes no direct reference to the outside world.
is itself a collaboration: a collaboration between the gestures of the artist and his materials. At which point the notion of agency starts to dissolve. And all sorts of questions pose themselves. Well, two kinds of questions. One, is it that artistic production is just that, an expression or reflection of industrial production? With the implied critiques of industrial or capitalist society that are the stock in trade of the radical left. And two, is it that artistic production is better understood as distributed? Is it, in other words, distributed throughout the materials and processes that make it up? Rather than being located in the head, the spirit, the will, or the intention of ‘the artist himself’?

Questions, which once posed about the assemblages of artistic production, immediately present themselves with even greater force in the context of technological assemblage. And do so in at least two ways.

First, in the context of the design and production of the technological assemblage. Who or what is it that inspires the design and the production? The conventional answer leads us variously to the lone inventor in his garret, or to the captain of industry. The Thomas Edison, the Henry Ford. But the door to decentering stands ajar. For, as we have already implied above, it is a small move from celebrating the genius of the heterogeneous engineer to celebrating the heterogeneity of that engineering in a much more cybernetic mode. And indeed, though this is not the context in which to spell this out, this appears the most important difference between those, such as Thomas Hughes, who talk of ‘system builders’ such as Edison, and those in the tradition of actor-network theory, who insist that entrepreneurs such as Louis Pasteur are better seen as effects rather than as prime movers.

Second, in the context of the mundane use of the technological assemblage. Here the move is also small. For I have argued that the technological assemblage, the hand and eye made space, works equally on the person and the environment of the person. That the user is, to use that phrase again, configured. And the additional move? This is to suggest that agency – creativity – is distributed between the human
and the non-human. That it does not reside simply in that which is human.

To make this argument fully is beyond the scope of this paper. But the outlines are clear enough. It is to say that what I have been calling the ‘eye’ and the ‘hand’ are metaphors. Metaphors for positions in a technological assemblage that do not necessarily map onto anything to do with the human. Which is, or so it seems, implied in a batch of recent writing in the sociology of technology.19 And by Lyotard when he talks about ‘the inhuman’: ‘You know’, he writes, ‘technology wasn’t invented by us humans. Rather the other way round’ (Lyotard, 1991: 12).20

3) *The decentered assemblage*. So the question is: how well does the master master? Or a parallel question. The system: how well is it integrated? To explore these questions properly is also beyond the scope of the present essay. But again the outline of the problem is clear. Schapiro on Cézanne again, as cited by Fisher:

> He loosened the perspective system of traditional art and gave to the space of the image the aspect of a world created free-hand and put together piecemeal from successive perceptions, rather than offered complete to the eye in one co-ordinating glance as in the ready-made geometrical perspective of Renaissance art. (Fisher, 1991: 210)

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19 And perhaps most obviously in actor-network theory, and in some of the writing by feminists such as Donna Haraway on cyborgs. In this context the difference between these traditions seems to be one of emphasis. There is a modernist strain towards centering – albeit the difficulties of centering – in actor network theory which is absent in the writing of Haraway who seems content to imagine that there are at best partial connections between partial cyborg-like subjects. An important alternative is to be found in the empirical philosophy of Annemarie Mol (1995).

20 Editor’s note: In the original paper, this quote is followed by a few mixed-up sentences. It reads: ‘and the that Now, however, with the disappearance of the environment, it is a small move to imagine that the user is, Which also makes sense in the context of technological assemblage. Indeed, the with tropes of system and cybernetics the door is already open.’
This catches the beginning of the scepticism of post-modernity, or as some sociologists prefer to call it, high modernity. Its piecemeal character. For if the self-regarding centering of agency or its conversion into an integrated though decentred cybernetic system is the optimistic modernist option, then other versions that are more sceptical, or perhaps more radical, are also possible. These are the versions that pose the question: what would the world and subjectivity be if it were not possible to draw matters together to a single point? Or, indeed, one might add, to the integrative mundanity implied by the rhopographic subject.

In the context of aesthetics this takes us from Cézanne to the cubists, with the kaleidoscopic butting together of different planes. And then, inter alia, to the clashing quotations in the art of those such as Pablo Picasso or (more recently) Jasper Johns or Robert Rauschenberg. Bits and pieces that do not fit together. That clash. That play off one another.

But similar experiments and experiences inform the character of technological assemblage. Here, to be sure, the integrative grip of the functional is stronger. But it is not everywhere found. For instance tensions and dispersions express themselves in the post-modern style of pastiche, quotation and the self-referential syntaxes that characterise buildings such as the Beaubourg or Frank Gehry’s house in Santa Monica. These, then, are technologies which not only perform themselves self-reflexively (which is to be sure one of the great high modernist tropes). They also perform themselves as decentred, in tension, as not being able to sum themselves up. And, correspondingly, tend to demand or perform body experiences and subjects that are likewise decentred.21 That are about how to make local and partial connections. Shifting connections.

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21 There is a discussion of the Gehry Santa Monica house in terms that are consistent with these in Jameson (1991). For further exploration, see Law (1998).
Which is, it seems to me, the major point of the cyborg metaphor that has been so movingly explored by Donna Haraway. For the cyborg is ‘inhuman’ in the Lyotardian sense touched on above. Haraway writes:

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; ... The cyborg is ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality. (Haraway, 1991b: 150)

But there is more than this. For, crucially, the cyborg is also monstrous, ironic, and politically radical:

Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve in larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method ... (Haraway, 1991b: 149)

‘Contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes’

This is the place where I stop. For it seems to me that this is also the unstable destination of this journey about still-life and technology. Leading us initially to the hand and eye made space of the body, our sense of the technological assemblage first detached us from a nature-given reading of the character of that body, and then started to erode itself. To raise questions about its production. To take the world inside itself and so to dissolve its own context. To raise questions about its own character as an assemblage. About its own integration. And finally, to ask about the rhopographic mundanity of the technological. To ask what might replace that rhopographic mundanity in the tensions and partialities of a technological politics. A politics that will, I hope, also manage without the overwhelming heroisms of megalography. A politics that is somewhere between. In a space, a set of spaces, that can only dimly be discerned.

references


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Robert Cooper (1931-2013) was a prominent theorist of organization, known for introducing postmodernism and post-structuralism to organization studies. He has also been highly influential in process studies of organization. After writing and publishing poetry in his early years, and a PhD at Liverpool University, he held academic positions at various English universities – Aston, Lancaster, Keele – finally ending as an honorary Professor at the University of Leicester.