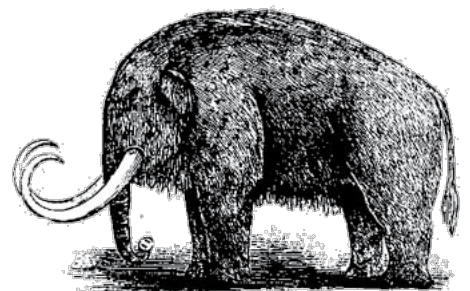


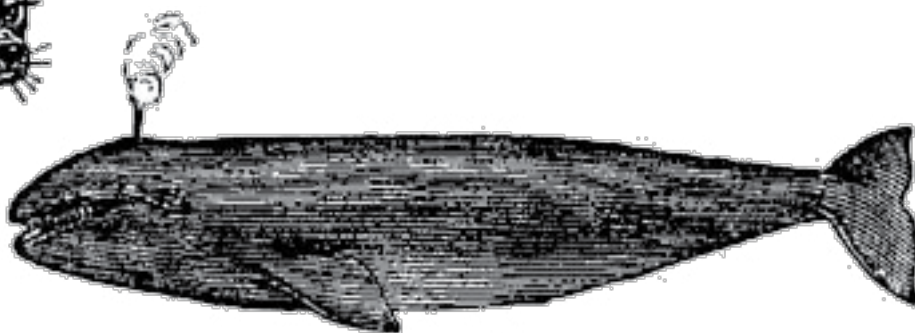
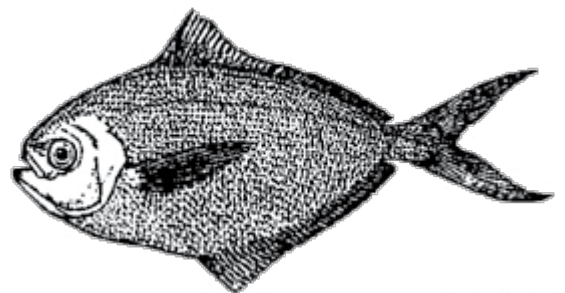
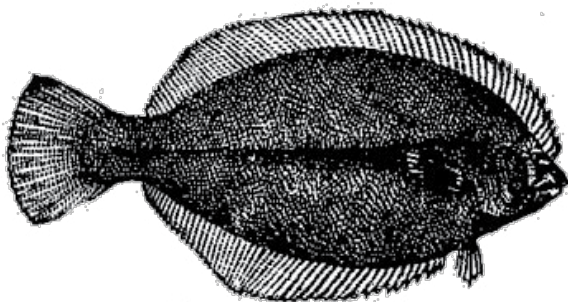


# Diversity / Abundance



a paradigm shift, shifting the paradigm  
a look at the effects from the abundance of postmodernity on diversity

Lloyd Godman 1998



Many thanks to - David Cross - Lawrence Jones

# Diversity / Abundance

a paradigm shift, shifting the paradigm  
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MFA Paper - Lloyd Godman 1998

‘Wallace later recalled the “fever-heat of expectation he felt”. “On my first walk into the forest I looked about, expecting to see monkeys as plentiful as zoological gardens, with humming –birds and parrots in profusion.” But after several days of seeing no monkeys and hardly any birds, he “began to think that these and other productions of the South American forests are much scarcer than they are represented to be by travellers”. Any one who has stepped into a rainforest, head full of images from glossy nature photography, has had roughly the same disappointment, which derives from confusing diversity with abundance.’<sup>1</sup>



Parakeet

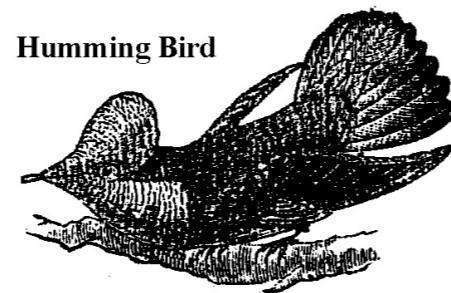


Squirrel Monkey

In a different context, Louis Menand in his text ‘Diversity’, in Critical Terms for Literary Study, states ‘Diversity is one of the problems of modernity,’ and much of his text is centered round the issues of multiculturalism and the growing awareness and importance of this from the 1960s. He discusses the Harvard report and mentions how the authors consider ‘diversity exclusively as a socio-economic phenomenon, a consequence of the natural inequalities of aptitude.’<sup>2</sup> He consequence of group mixing, not group separation.<sup>3</sup> He then concludes that through the continues, by arguing that ‘what has happened to American life since the mid-1980s is a cultural phenomenon which is the commercial mass media a “common culture” has emerged. and he then states, ‘ The deeper difficulty is that diversity is a paradox; the more attention you pay it, the more quickly it disappears.’<sup>4</sup>

## Globalization

If diversity is explicit in modernity in its catch-cry to “make it new” and (make it different), then perhaps abundance is implicit in postmodernity and perhaps this abundance is a signifier of the emergence of a “common culture” (globalization) that Menand talks of.

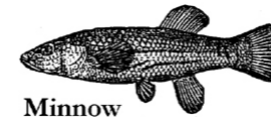


Humming Bird

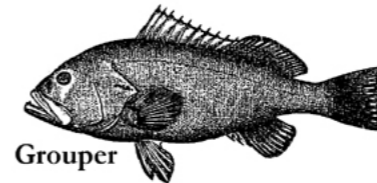
For it is a culture where mass-media, universal marketing and digitization have created universal codes that are often self-cloning and that have continued permeating economics, science and the arts with such a degree that it has implications for diversity. A range of economic aspects, such as the rise of multinational corporations and economic super powers, and a shift from an economy based on production to one based on consumption are often held to be hallmarks of postmodernity. Through economic globalization, multinational corporations have used aggressive marketing, advertising, and mass media to monopolize a growing market share with abundance but not necessarily diversity.



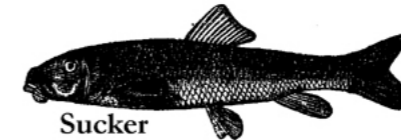
Spider Monkey



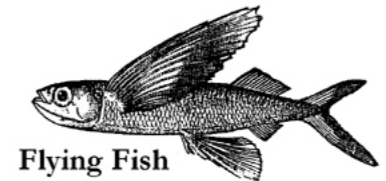
Minnow



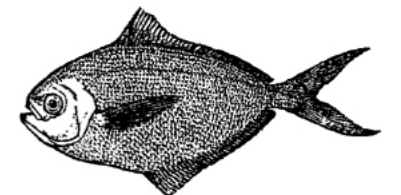
Grouper



Sucker



Flying Fish



Dollarfish



Hammerhead



Fallfish

Examples of this situation abound !

For instance, up until the late 1960s, through the circumstances of relative isolation the soft drink industry had developed a diverse culture; each community had its own companies, which generated their own labels, bottles and flavors unique to that area. If one was fortunate to travel at the time there was noticeable difference from one town to another, but as these small localized companies were either taken over or succumbed to a larger universal ‘cola culture’ diversity diminished as abundance increased.



Chess



Bunch Grass

The strategy was to produce a universally understood and safe product, one that is based on a set standard and is globally available. Before this era, social attitudes to soft drink consumption accepted it as a novelty to be drunk on special occasions only. But the expanded availability of the product through “cola culture” permeated society with an abundance, that in some places displaced water as a safer, more “natural drink” of the human and left a cola dispenser on every second urban corner.

This strategy became a contemporary marketing trend applied to almost everything, with some products dominating marketshare and becoming global fashion labels. Idioms like Nike, Rebok, and Adidas dominated and displaced countless smaller regional companies with their associated work forces.



**Chati**



**Weasel**



**Racket Tail**

Further to Benjamin, the postmodern theorist, Baudrillard suggests the era of the code superseded the era of the sign. He implies that through the use of code-binary code of computer technology, DNA codes or digital codes in television-” that the original in reproduction is the principle of generation, and not the object generated. Complete reversibility is possible; the last ‘original’ produced can be perfectly reproduced. The difference between the real and its representation is erased; the age of the simulacra emerges.” 5

While the postmodern discourse of abundance has been loud in its self-celebration, at the same time, John Lechte comments in his book *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*, “in the discourse of consumption, there is an anti-discourse; the exalted discourse of abundance is everywhere duplicated by a critique of consumer society”. 6

The question of the effect of abundance on diversity has frequently been raised. Fredric Jameson argues, “Where Fordism and classical imperialism designed their products centrally and then imposed them by fiat on an emergent public, post Fordism puts the new computerized technology to work by custom-designing its products for individual markets.



**Ferret**

Based on the concept of limitless abundance, design, usually western, took place in one country, and manufacturing, usually Asian, where labour was cheap and environmental laws less stringent, took place in another, and availability ultimately became global. Franchises like KFC, McDonalds, Burger King and KMart expanded across the international market eventually breaching the “iron curtain” and markets in China. Similarly, hotel chains like Centra, Park Royal, Carlton etc. expanded globally and like “cola culture” they used the strategy of a universally understood product, where the meals, service, décor, and in some cases architectural designs were not only similar but identical.

Corporations mainly based in the United States and Europe, took advantage of deregulated environments in smaller economies, swamping markets through technological production advantages and advertising hype in a manner that not be reciprocated, particularly from the agricultural strengths of the host economy because of tariffs, quotas and trade restrictions.

Much earlier, Walter Benjamin, one of the key thinkers of modernism, identified the idea of model and series, where the model represented the original and the series represented copies from the original. The inventions of photo-mechanical reproduction and other devices created an abundance of images such as the world had never seen before. As mass production has continued to grow, with a greater range of products produced at faster rates the line between original and series dissolved.



**Yew Tree**



**Weeping Willow**

This has indeed been called postmodern marketing and it can be thought to ‘respect’ the values and cultures of the local population by adapting its various goods to suit those vernacular languages and practices”. 7 But Jameson’s use of the automobile industry to illustrate his point appears inappropriate. From the invention of the automobile, a proliferation of companies developed their own technology and design ideas and from this, a range of distinctive body shapes emerged: a Rover looked like a Rover, a Renault looked like a Renault, a Ford like a Ford and so on.

While Ford might now offer wider range of colours than they did in the days of the model T, there are now fewer manufacturers. Through computer-aided designs, wind tunnels, etc., a generation of automobile has evolved that appear remarkably similar from one manufacturer to another, so while we might have a range of styles (station wagon, hatchback, sedan, saloon, sports, etc) a single hybrid dominates within these styles that combines function and form. The “custom designing” as Jameson puts it appears on a cosmetic level only, with variance in some cases the manufacturer’s badge and of course the price.



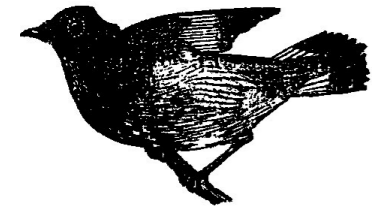
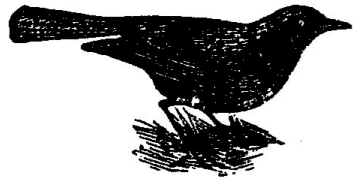
**Hobby**



**Skimmer**



**Bittern**

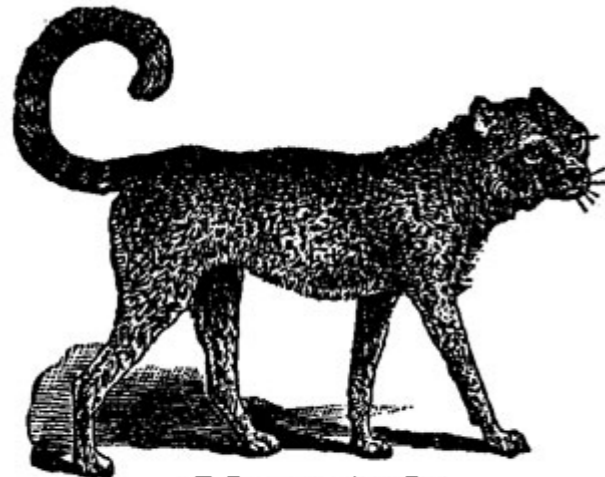


**Redstarts**

Contemporary technology often demands a specific type of function, a function that exploits abundance, and guarantees domination through proliferation and in turn helps secure its future survival, it is a function where diversity is not desirable. While various operating systems evolved at the birth of the computer age, through monopolization, IBM- formatted PCs dominated in a manner that left consumers locked into a specific system that was not appropriate for all situations. It left consumers with a Y2K problem to rectify and coincidentally Bill Gates as one of the planet's wealthiest individuals.

The effects of this monopolization within the computer industry are even more evident with the recent court cases of plagiarism between Microsoft's Windows 95 application and Macintosh, and also the anti-competitive practices suit between Microsoft and Netscape. Even now, some commentators argue Linux is a more flexible operating system, but Microsoft dominates by offering Windows 98 in package deals with new hardware sales and ensuring an abundance of their system for future updates. Similar battles took place in the early

years of vinyl recordings regarding the speed of the disk, (78, 45, 33 rpm), and again with various systems in the popular recorded music tape the familiar cassette becoming the eventual winner. Again, while there was some validity in the argument for Betamax as a superior system, the battle for a global video format was won through aggressive marketing, introduction into key markets, and a longer recording tape time by the VHS format developed by JVC and Matsushita. 8 Now we face similar battles with Zip, and Jaz disks, CD rom and DVD rom. While a system can become deficient or even obsolete, efficient global information exchange relies on universal codes and systems to decipher these codes, and the extravagant abundance of a system guarantees its survival. The implementation of an untried system on a global scale could bring digital communication into temporary chaos, a risk not worth considering for those already locked in to a system.



**Cheetah**

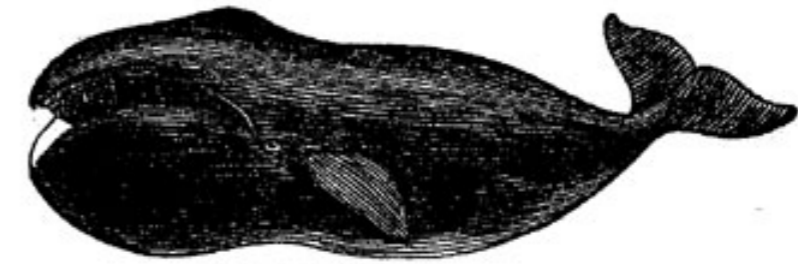


**Gopher**

In the arena of biotechnology, diversity might appear to be more essential. At least on a technoscientific level it would seem the age of genetic engineering provides the potential for unlimited diversity, with an infinite potential of hybrids that could be developed, but in reality the opposite occurs. Jeremy Rufkin says "The practice of biotechnology – gene splicing, tissue culture, clonal propagation and monoculturing - is likely to result in increased genetic uniformity, a narrowing of the gene pool and loss of the very genetic diversity that is so essential to guaranteeing the success of the biotech industry in the future". 9



**Howler Monkey**



**Right Whale**

Already various factors including market forces have conspired, forcing farmers to grow high-performance mono-cultures. Jeremy Rufkin states "The Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI) reports that of seventy-five kinds of vegetable grown in the United States, 97 percent of all the varieties have become extinct in less than eighty years. According to the RAFI study, of the 7,098 apple varieties grown in the United States between 1804 and 1905, 6,121 or 86.2 percent have since become extinct. Of the 2,683 pear varieties in use in the last century, 2,354 or 87.77 percent are now extinct. The grim statistics are repeated for every food crop". "Garrison Wilkes, professor of botany at the University of Massachusetts, says that the spread of modern agricultural practices is quickly destroying the genetic resources upon which it is built and likens the situation to "taking stones from the foundation to repair the roof". In the present environment, even this technology can not create useful new genes in the laboratory, biotechnological science needs as large a genetic pool as it can find and preserving diversity guarantees a rich resource to draw from.



**Humpback Whale**

Like Cola Culture, the Biotech industry is also another example of a looming abundance of products with a reduced number of suppliers. Rufkin comments further, "Several factors have combined to create what industry analysts are calling a global "Life industry". The relaxing of trade restrictions with global trade agreements, including the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), Maastricht, and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the new ease of managing and integrating far-flung business interests by way of computers and advanced telecommunications technology, and the spectacular advances in biotechnologies have all helped spur the creation of a new kind of global commerce that trades in "life products" of every kind. The consolidation of the life sciences industry by global commercial enterprises rivals the consolidations, mergers and acquisitions going on in the other great technology arena of the twenty-first century, computers, telecommunications, entertainment, and the information services, although much less attention has been focused on the life sciences companies in the media and public policy".



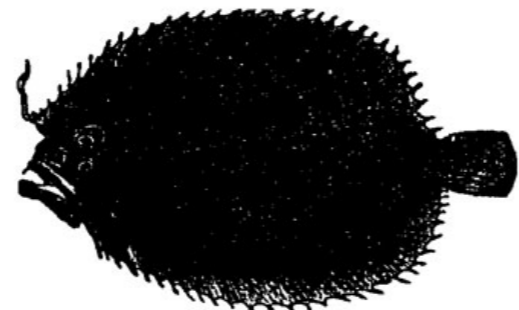
**Grey Whale**

The contemporary abundance of images, has no historical parallel, and through mass media the proliferation of images confronts and even confuses the global society it represents. Dissemination through advancement of processes, distribution and growth of venues means the image is just another product of the consumer society, and once consumed can be easily discarded. The increasing world's population also has an effect on this great abundance of images. Some commentators suggest there are more people that have lived on the planet in the past 10 years than have lived in all recorded history. By transposing this into art practice advertising etc, taking into account social changes that allows a greater percentage of the population participation in the visual arts and related fields, there are probable more people making art in the past 10 years than all recorded history in the long previous period. Images are no longer the peculiar, precious objects they once were, they are no longer a rare commodity within society, and despite a market, constantly hungry to consume new images, there is still an abundance and over supply.

So while there is this unquestioned abundance of images; perhaps contemporary art practice is the area of postmodernity where diversity survives, perhaps it is an area where diversity is acknowledged and encouraged, perhaps it is an area where it is necessary, perhaps it is the nucleus of the arts activity and drives conceptual, aesthetic and technical investigation. From the 1970s, a trend that grew in contemporary art practice that appeared to encourage diversity, was the under-pinning of theory and image, theorist and artist. Art schools began acknowledging art theory employing lecturers and establishing departments to teach it. These new lecturers projected themselves as an innovative, exciting, subversive proposition that challenged not only society, but the tradition, power and privilege of the established art history departments.



**Lemming**



**Topknot**



**Glutton**



**Passion Flower**

While they exposed students to contemporary global issues in a manner that initially directed a minority of students to base their work on specific issues but later became a formality for the majority undertaking art education. As the theory departments grew and their power grew, they pushed the reset button on the climate within academia. In his text Menand talks of power and privilege and how 'demographics of American higher education have been transformed' 10 in the past few decades, particularly in education. White males no longer exclusively lecture to other white males, and in art practice events took place that shifted the focus from art objects and aesthetics to issues, issues that largely dealt with interpretations of equality, race and gender.

The ideas of Lyotard, Baudrillard, Lacan, Foucault, Barthes, Kristeva, Saussure etc. were introduced to students as a means of exploring contemporary issues through the visual arts that challenged existing systems and pushed the boundaries. It was an exciting and stimulating time when there was a diverse range of new work, and students that accepted these challenges and incorporated them in their practice, were soon promoted through the inclusion in key exhibitions, collections, reviews etc. They became role models and soon it seemed a message emerged; if as an artist you wished to succeed your work must have theoretical support. And more importantly self-promotion, networking and social relationships with writers, curators etc. was more important than making art. As a second generation of theorists became employed, in some schools, like the art history departments before them, the art theory departments inevitably became institutionalized. For some students, doors opened that offered relevant debate and dialogue that progressed their ideas and extended their work.



**Teasel**



**Fungi**



**Flytrap**

However, for others doors closed and they found only a narrow corridor of fashionable prescription to work from that they had little interest in and which they could see no relationship to their work, but felt compelled to follow to attain reasonable grades. In some circles, rather than providing a base to expand a diverse culture from, theory also became a means of gaining credibility, a means of attaching fashionable labels to new cliches. From one phase to another, the representation of specific objects (false breasts, corsets, barbie dolls, angels, Saint Sebastian, preserving jars etc.), the use of certain materials and processes, (stripped willow, bees wax, muslin, slate, copper, unmounted and unframed photographs, fragmented text, etc), and especially the exclusivity of language became a necessary currency, knowing the currency allowed one access, without it you were "no one".

Despite the deconstruction and death of the master narrative, the power and privilege of institutionalized theory ensured the birth of another narrative, as his/tories were replaced with "her/stories" a "miss narrative" evolved. As work with favored current ideas was promoted it became immensely popular with a younger generation of students, to the point of cult status. Artists like Cindy Sherman, Robert Mapplethorpe and others replaced their heterosexual male counterparts from the generations before as contemporary models. They replaced the tired old patriarchal models of modernism and because of the increase of students undertaking fine arts, they were emulated in art schools on a global scale as never before, creating more Cindy Sherman look a likes than sun sets. It ensured a global abundance of practice centered on the new diversity of theories promoted by theorists, institutions curators etc., it cemented a new set of players in a new narrative, and as it became established as main stream in Western culture, it also imposed itself as a universal culture. In some cases, not only the directions students followed, but the materials their art work was made from, how the work looked, how and where it was hung, was described as an imperative by people who had never made art.



**Rhubarb**

It became more than important to have one's work sanctified by the right people and to do this some artist were willing to take the advice or sacrifice their own input. Despite the fashionable rhetoric about diversity, multiculturalism etc, like the generation before them, students work was often cloned directly from the ideas and art practice of lecturers or the references presented to them. While a minority of students benefited from the system, many still left art schools as they had during modernism; disillusioned, and on reflection felt they had been side tracked into areas they had little interest in and not achieved their original objectives. To varying degrees within any educational system, students risk conditioning, a move from the potential of their own ideas to those promoted by the institution or staff, and much later they may also face an eventual commodification of their productivity by curators, dealers and collectors. In a search for a context to place their work in, or a means to succeed, artists may opt for the safety net of "contemporary familiarity" of exhibited or published work.

A familiarity that arises through technological structures that allow the rapid dissemination of new ideas in art practice - communicated, assimilated, re-communicated to a larger audience and re-assimilated as work that has a contemporary aesthetic and theory base; but a predictability about it where the only diversity comes from interpretation. Despite the best intentions, in New Zealand and other Western art education systems, methods often over centre around the artists model and emulating the existing which ensures a great abundance of capable work but not necessarily the diversity or innovation one might expect from people involved in a creative activity. The abundance of submissions for U E and Bursary Art produces the necessity for a standard format and assessment criteria, but like a microsoft operating system it also assures a certain out come. An out come that often lingers in to the first year of tertiary education as a accustomed method of presenting final work for assessment, and an persistent emphasis on the artist model through both high school and tertiary levels assures the devaluation and erosion of students own ideas.

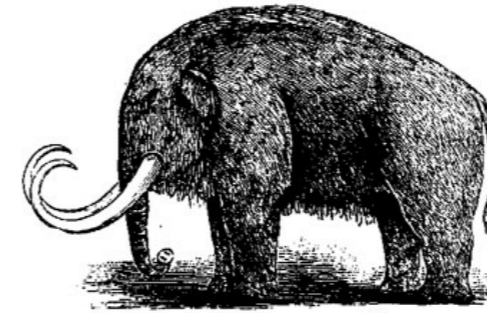
But the hierarchical relationship of art practitioners and other interested parties that effects the diversity of works acknowledged, and the abundance of works created is not new. H.A. Fields writes in Egyptian Art; "It may seem strange that in Egyptian society, which believed that artists possessed the power to perform such miracles, and in which art was not just a pleasant pastime but a primary and vital necessity, their actual social status was low, far below the status of prehistoric witch-doctors. The fact was that the craftsmen-artists were only material executants, bound by rules which they had to apply but which they had not drafted, as well as ritual formulas, the real significance of which they were unaware. The true creators were always the priests, or rather the magician -priests. Without their intervention, the images produced by craftsmen-artists, even though in accordance with the canons of art or magic, would have possessed no magic power at all".



**Yucca**



**Artichoke**



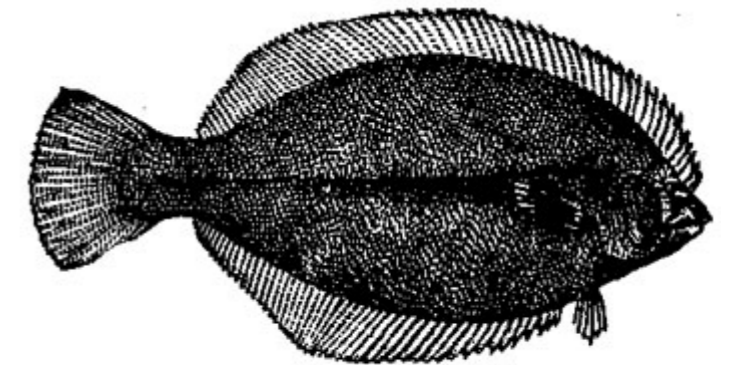
**Mammoth**

Multiculturalism may be seen as an attempt to preserve and encourage diversity in the postmodern age of abundance but itself may be co-opted by the universal culture, becoming merely cosmetic. Mendand states,"multiculturalism" means genuine diversity-[only] insofar as it refers to functionally autonomous subcultures within a dominant culture", then nominally 'multicultural' societies such as the United States are really becoming less multiculturally diverse, "for when the whole culture is self-consciously "diverse", when television is self -consciously "diverse" - real diversity has disappeared." 11



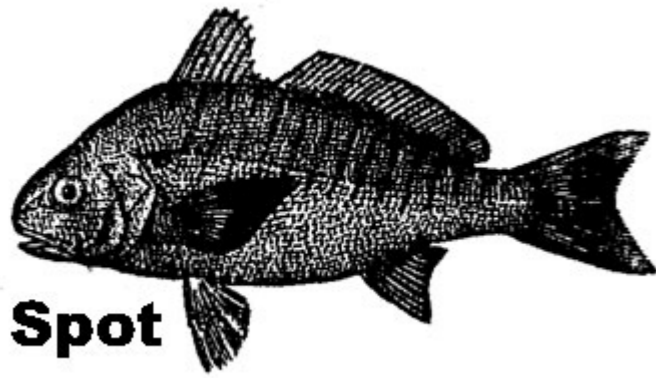
**Sweet sop**

And in 1930 R.H. Lilenski made the comment in A Miniature History of European Art; "Thus the human activity that we call art, which began with the creation of the magic image to secure some vital need, which has been at other times a most powerful instrument of tyranny and at other times again a most powerful instrument of religion, has now become an activity pursued for its own sake by a small group of experimenting artists, who are kept going by another small group consisting partly of people who believe in the metaphysical value of this work as an accompaniment and symbol of contemporary thought, and partly of people who hope to make profit eventually from these artists' researches".

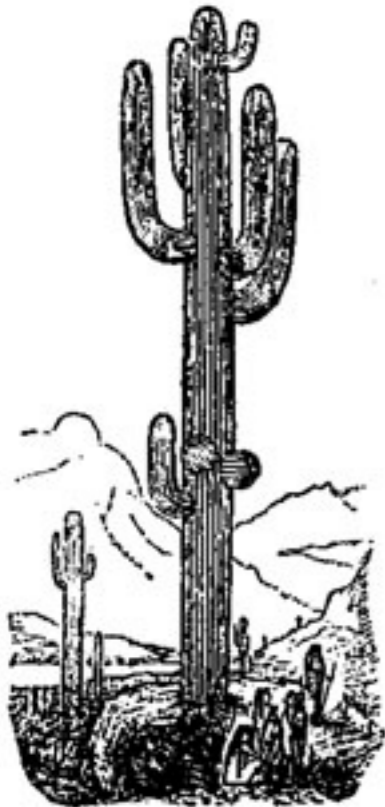


**Flounder**

David Quammen refers again to Wallace when he talks of diversity in nature. "Distribution, Wallace had seen, is commonly delineated by some sort of geological barrier - a ridge of mountains, a wide river a discontinuity of vegetation reflecting a discontinuity of geological substrate. He had noticed that two similar species of animal, closely related often occupy opposite sides of such a boundary". Diversity occurs through isolation and islands offer the best examples of diversity in Biology.



**Spot**



**Cereus**

Despite human intervention and depletion of the gene pool through species extinction etc., biodiversity is seen by biologists as a desirable attribute to be preserved. Perhaps more through circumstance than design, a typical nature/culture dichotomy, emerges for in economics, science, and art it appears to be abundance that prevails in the present environment. In an article in Time Magazine David Quammen draws a comparison with the erosion of biodiversity and the unworkable idea that biotic diversity can survive in ever decreasing islands of nature, and the erosion of culture as McLuhan's global village becomes a reality and contemporary communication pushes local cultures to extinction. He finishes the article "The dismal irony of our age is that these two seemingly opposite trends, cultural unification and ecological fragmentation, yield a common result: loss of diversity. The global archipelago will be a world that's starker, uglier, duller and lonelier for us humans as a species and we will experience that loneliness together" 12



**Coffee**

To finish, I go back to an opening statement I made by Menand. 'The deeper difficulty is that diversity is a paradox; the more attention you pay it, the more quickly it disappears.' If, in the arts, it is similar to biogeology, and it is cultural islands that offer the greatest diversity, perhaps there is a place for the islands of regionalism amongst the abundant, conformist postmodern climate of globalization.

Questions arise: is diversity in art practice desirable, and how can a diverse art practice exist outside the paradigm of institutionalized art theory? Do artists working outside the model wait for a paradigm shift, or shift the paradigm?

end - Diversity/A bun dance

1. David Quamen 1996 The Song of the Dodo , Page 62
2. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin 1995, Critical terms for Literary Study, P343
3. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin 1995, Critical terms for Literary Study, P348, 344
4. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin 1995, Critical terms for Literary Study, P347
5. John Lechte. Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers, 1994 P235
6. John Lechte. Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers, 1994 P234
7. F.Jemeson, The Seeds of Time, New York Columbia Press 1994 P204
8. WWW Urban Legens com/products/beta vs vhs html
9. Jeremy Rufkin, The Biotech Century, Tracher/Putman Books, 1998, p107
10. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin 1995, Critical terms for Literary Study, P344
11. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin 1995, Critical terms for Literary Study, P348
12. David Quammen Special issue Time November 1997 P 58