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# VATS OF THE STORIED SUN

36 Pages

## Room 1
## Clay

One hundred fifty thousand years ago, genetically modern humans first appeared in the archaeological record. Possessing the same DNA as we do now, they looked like us, walked upright, hunted, and used simple stone tools. But they did not act like us. These early creatures did not make figurative art, ritualistically bury their dead, live in unforgiving climates, use complex tools, or ornament their bodies—a handful of traits among several that archaeologists use to define the behaviorally modern human. In other words, they could not yet transcend nature—environmental or bodily—through technology and symbolic thought. A stone was a stone, and a body was a body.

For 100,000 years after their silent arrival, premodern homo

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sapiens lived by the indifferent and brutal facts of nature until a phenomenon occurred that archaeologists call the “Great Leap,” after which modern human behavior in all its forms abruptly took hold—the capacity to use tools to transform natural media, to elevate our bodies with decorations of stone, metals, and paints, and to learn through social ritual. Humans first scattered from Africa around this time and into harsher climates, a feat of adaptation enabled not just through advanced technology itself, but also through the new symbolic tools of language and ritual that allowed people to spread knowledge among themselves and across generations. This sudden appearance of language as a technology was thus not a product of our genetic development, but a chance mutation itself that accelerated our development, supplementing—even supplanting—our biology. We

were no longer creatures guided from birth by innate drives and intuitions. We had become empty slates awaiting knowledge and narratives, beings with notions of self and soul subject to constant reinterpretation, with the first stirrings of the thought: *this could be otherwise*.

We discovered clay 10,000 years ago. It was used primarily to make ornamented,

watertight vessels and sculpted fertility charms. Plastic and rapidly workable, it offered a fluid medium for expression never before seen with stone, wood, or bone. As a material with no implicit value or history of use, the earliest vessels imitated other materials, animals, and construction techniques. They often represented gourds and animals with crane-like spouts, handles, and feet. Later—with bronze and iron as templates—the dominant styles of hand and wheel sculpting suggest metal prototypes, through which clay came to emulate rarer materials available only to a wealthy elite. Perhaps channeling cultural imperatives of fruitfulness or simply gripped by desire for our own form, ancient sculptors of fertility charms depicted bodies in states of hypersexual arousal.

Both these traditions of use enact an ancestral, alchemical drive to turn one thing into another

through technology. The malleability of clay lends itself to its own transmutation, where it can become other things through the power of representation. Similarly, ancient humans sought to alter the body through depicting it as we desired it to be, as something otherwise. Whether or not these transformations are valid by modern metrics, they foreshadow a future rich with cosmetic surgeries and iPhone screens with virtual pushable buttons.

Like the development of a new larynx or glottis, clay became an extra-bodily organ of speech, another channel for the realm of language, whose continual contradictions and interventions against natural order remind us that from the beginning we never believed that we, our world, or even meaning was fixed to some anchor of essence. Mud can be metal, words can change forever with one misinterpretation, and our bodies need not be used as nature would dictate. The ancient use of clay foresees a world with slang, uteruses in men, and gardens of fruit without seeds.

## Room 2
## Concrete and the Skeuomorph

The earliest Greeks built their temples out of wooden posts, lintels, and beams with mud brick walls. As they mastered fine stone quarrying and joinery from their Egyptian teachers, temple construction shifted to masonry but maintained the architectural elements that spoke to its wooden origins. Fluted stone columns appeared as bundles of reeds or plant stems, and at the entablature above, vertical bars chiseled into the stone imitated what were once the ends of enormous wood beams. Wooden pegs that once secured the roof in place gave way to ornamental, circular markings that neatly filled empty space. All-stone temples became mythologies themselves, bizarre stories in which Greek architectural history was codified.



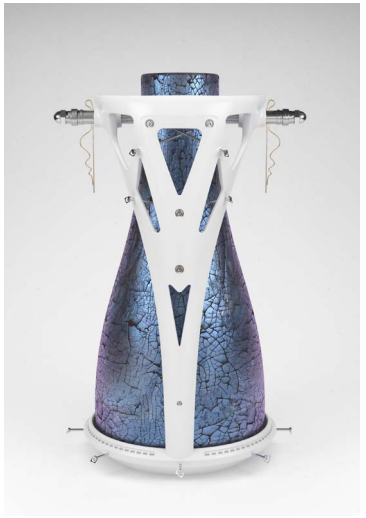
As always with the appearance of a new technology or material, stone conjured up the familiar shapes of the past to ease its own coming. Even today, whatever wild potential exists for the experience of interacting with the computer, our most advanced technology, we still conceive of it as physical desk space with tiny files, folders, and windows.

At first eager to learn from its Greek neighbors and then to conquer them, Rome appropriated everything from its Gods to its art. But Rome's distinguishing invention and true success was Roman concrete, a formulation that they mastered for the first time. In concrete, Rome reprised Greco-Egyptian techniques including the references to vestigial wooden construction, but with a new ease and speed. The Greeks and Egyptians were limited in scale and scope by the unwieldiness of their materials and the pace of ashlar construction,

which kept structures comparatively few and simple. Concrete—easy to make and easy to work—allowed Rome to build everything that had come before with a fraction of the time and effort. Arches were now poured rather than laid, ornate facades molded rather than carved, and vaulted ceilings cast instead of nailed together from wood.

It was not enough just to militarily conquer the western world. Roman imagery spread far and fast, transmitted through the ether of concrete. Distant people and cultures were homogenized under the auspices of the Roman aesthetic embedded in the concrete aqueducts that fed their baths and temples. The functional backgrounds of the marks in these architectures were quickly lost to time as wood gave way to stone, which gave way to concrete, which further displaced these hollow marks across countries and seas into new peoples and cities.

As we are slowly removed from an understanding of materials and the historical necessity that gave rise to the marks surrounding us in buildings and objects, those marks become alien, fanciful, and even stylish. Concrete enabled reproduction and displacement of such marks at a pace that obscured their genesis and meaning, transforming them into caricatures of themselves. Functional form is fossilized into style. Archaeology has come to identify such marks which shift from utility into decoration as “Skeuomorphs,” which means “vessel form.” Even in this term is the suggestion: these bodies are empty, waiting to be filled and refilled with meaning.



Room 3
The Myth of Purple

Today the color known as Tyrian purple can be found in a computer's RGB color space with the hex designation #66023. For most of history, however, Tyrian purple was hardly seen beyond the Phoenician coasts where it was extracted from the rare sea snail, Murex. While archaeologists have evidence of the dye's first use around 1400 B.C., legend says Hercules discovered it when his dog's mouth turned purple from eating snails. As the story goes, it was only by coloring a robe in those rich purple shades that Hercules would win the love of the nymph Tyrus.

For the early Mediterranean world, before trade was regular and ships could cross the sea with ease, Tyrian purple only lived in the imaginations of most people. Its story only

spread slowly in oral myth. Passing travelers and merchants might have recounted the story of Hercules and the purple robe, though their wild gesturing would have only highlighted the limits of daisy-chained retellings and made the distance of the Tyrian dyes seem all the greater. But what lacked in tangibility was made up for in the desire to make myth a reality. Faster ships were built and roads soon cut across mountains and deserts to connect us with distant lands and unknown pleasures. It would turn out that myth, and the desire to bridge the gap between reality and imagination, was the real mother of invention.

As trade networks expanded and spread the dye through the western world, sumptuary laws ensured that only royalty and the priestly classes could possess the color, though common

people might have caught a glimpse of it in a passing royal procession or in trade cities like Colophone, where the dye fetched hundred of times its weight in silver. The acceleration of trade sped the dispersion of not only physical goods like the dye itself, but also to a greater extent of stories that fed our desire for them. Virality unfolded much like it does today, and Tyrian purple came to be known throughout the world as a mark of exuberance and divinity with connotations of sexuality and exclusivity. An industry rose up around the dye, and Phoenicia, whose name translates to ‘land of purple’, became a wealthy trade city. That region saw major advances in technologies like paper-making, shipbuilding, and navigational instruments. In short, some of the first technologies of exchange came about for the purpose of serving a luxury good.

Trailing the success of Roman concrete by about a thousand years, photography and the printing press emerged as two of the most influential communication technologies yet. They transmitted stories of distant lands, unimpeded by the weight and friction of matter. The hyperbolic legends of Tyrian purple once merely enriched the physical commodity of the dye, whereas the printing press and photography soon privileged the story as the commodity. The average person no longer needed to scramble to catch a glimpse of the queen's storied purple, but instead, for the price of a book, one could luxuriate in the magnificence of a perfumed royal court in the comfort of their own boudoir.

The same advances in chemistry that brought about photography also ushered in a new science of artificial dyes. By the 1850's, William Henry

Perkins, an eighteen-year-old British chemistry student, serendipitously discovered a synthetic Tyrian purple he called Mauveine. Then, when Queen Victoria, the first queen to notably collect and sanction royal photographic portraits, wore a silk gown dyed with Mauveine to the Royal Exhibition of 1862, news and images of her brilliant gown spread far and wide. Perkins quickly took advantage of the craze. He developed an industrial process, built a factory, and produced the dye by the ton, making a piece of the queen's storied purple accessible to just about anyone. The brilliantly purple Mauveine could now be cheaply synthesized by the ton, and the process of pulverizing tens of thousands of snail shells to dye a section of robe became far too physically involved and costly. The seductive myths and connotations of purple persisted in the economized forms of stories, photographs, and inexpensive synthesized colorants while the demanding physical particulars of producing Tyrian purple were lost to time.

Generally, improvements in mass production and communication favor a very literal dematerialization of commodities, distilling and emphasizing their immaterial aspects like story and surface appearance; a lighter yet seemingly identical cargo is always more profitable. Moreover, these technologies tend to become cheaper and more widely accessible with time, as was the case with photography, the press, and chemical synthesis. In turn, the ability to take part in, shape, and move cultural myths is democratized, and so too is the power that comes in leveraging those myths.

Room 4
Plastic

Taking the names of Greek shepherds, Polystyrene, Polyvinyl, and Polyethylene were among the first scientific developments in what might appear to some as transmutational magic but is known to others as the plastics industry. What begins as crude oil is refined into a material of infinite potential forms: toothbrushes, gemstones, goblets, silk, bones, dog toys, aortas, wood siding, abstract art, and beyond what came in the past, untold forms we can't yet envision.

First produced in the 19th century as a replacement for rarer substances like ivory, rubber, and shellac (harvested from invertebrate secretions), plastic was conceived so as to cut manufacturers free from one of the greatest obstacles in industrial production: the expense

of harvesting and transforming natural materials. But it wasn't until the Second World War, when there was growing need to preserve scarce resources, that plastic came into widespread development. The US government heavily funded and required cooperation among major corporations like Dupont, Dow, and Monsanto. Nylon found military applications in parachutes, rope, and body armor, while Plexiglass replaced glass in aircrafts and submarine periscopes.

Hoping to keep up momentum after the war, petrochemical companies saw potential in newfound American spending power and a booming consumer economy, but the fact that plastic as a material had no history or innate value posed a major hurdle. There were no tales of a princess in her parlor of polyethylene or of great monuments sided with high density

vinyl. The stuff of myth that enchants any desirable good was missing. Plastic had only utility, which alone had never been enough to move consumers. In order to sell these nondescript, primordial distillates that could only be molded or shaped, designers had plastic do what it does best: represent things other than itself. From its beginning, plastic was a material that would retrospectively inhabit history, resolved only to emulate what had come before.

Plastic found a natural home in American modernist design during the early 20th century, whose distinctive spirit of progress saw trains and toasters alike embellished with speed stripes and streamlined pencil sharpeners that seemed to race toward a bright and bountiful future. Opposed to a sense of progress heralded by pragmatic minimalism, as championed by European designers,

American design suggested futurity through ornament and abstract forms that riffed on historical and sometimes anatomical vocabularies, merely evoking senses of progress and movement. This was well-served by plastic, a willing receptacle for these expressive, kinetic, and appropriately bodily forms.

Further inland from that American brand of avant-garde, an aspirational middle class turned to plastic to mimic gemstones, jewelry, furs, and precious metals as plastic found widespread use. With the aid of a new and booming PR industry, Dupont funded a campaign known as "Nylon Mania" to market the plastic they hoped would replace silk. Soon, a second skin spun entirely from petrochemicals caressed the inner thighs of millions of American woman.

Petrochemical plastics changed the face of industry, consumer

culture, and the surface of our planet and bodies. But what once represented infinite potential for new and undiscovered forms seems stubbornly tied to shapes and tastes of the past as plastic sought validation. It took a consumer culture that hailed surface image supreme to accept a material like plastic that had no history of use; a material that was, ultimately, only significant in its capable but superficial approximation of other things. For every attempt to challenge plastic for its cheapness or inauthenticity, there was twice the willingness by others to abandon the dogmas that emphasized substance and notions of value rooted in authenticity, a repudiation of tradition that opened up lifestyles once possible only for those with greater material resources.

Where once a magnificent story and rarity had turned the engine of industry behind silk

and rare stones, the alchemical transformations of plastic delivered their likenesses at a fraction of the cost, all amid simulated pageantry meant to complete the illusion. We collectively somehow ache still for these simulacra, in which our cultural memory can still hear the echoes of their original stories but which we cannot make out clearly anymore. As Roland Barthes notes, “the hierarchy of substances had been abolished: a single one replaced them all: The world can be plasticized.”

## Room 5
## The Unburdened Image

The technology of Plastics, from its origins as sedimentary clays to the mass-produced refined petrochemicals we know today, is more infrastructural than material. It is a medium through which ritual, history and expressions move forward through time as we continually recast their undying forms into new bodies of clay, cement, and polyacrylate. In its retelling of a story, an effective plastic material spans huge distances of space to connect us with tales of faraway places, both real and hyperbolized. By economizing the reproduction of myths, stories, and the imagery in which they congeal, a plastic eases their dispersion across the world and satisfy our desire for newness, progress, and otherness. On one hand it connects us with comforting shapes that speak to our origins, while on the other delivering promises of betterness and difference, tracing a circuitous path from the past to the present and somewhere onward, elsewhere.

Plastic materials speak a truth that the bones of what makes up our material world are meaningless, even unnecessary, as long as semblance is faithfully carried from one place or time to the next. But this transplantation of appearance is far from a perfect retelling of a story, and threatens us with a superficial relationship to our world where we are ripe for manipulation and abuse. In context, ornament, myth, and skeuomorph originate from histories and traditions that in turn arise from necessity, utility, and ultimately one's survival. As these forms are transmitted ever faster, catapulted by technologies of reproduction—plastics notable among them, but also loom weaving,

the printing press, television, and now the internet—they are stripped of matter, dimension, and context, rendering them little more than abstract stylistic gestures devoid of their original meaning. This dematerialization is as much a natural consequence of these tools as it is a convenient feature of the arithmetic of capitalist production.

In this lineage of increasingly plastic media, the 3D rendered image is the logical conclusion. It is a medium for creation and reproduction that has finally cast off material constraints entirely, existing purely as lifelike image. Paired with the internet, it transports raw material from all around the world compressed into the weightless cargo of binary code and coordinates it into the pale imitation of matter, person, or place. So it goes—the world becomes more speculative and quick-paced, hesitant to mobilize

bulky physical resources and manpower, trying to stay agile and adaptable. Little or no physical matter moves or is created in 3D rendering; only image. As all life is increasingly mediated by pure image, original context disappears along with materiality, and we transition from an existence characterized by being into one of possessing, ultimately into one of appearing. In such a world, ourselves and all that we encounter become hopelessly displaced, disoriented, and alienated from physical origins and richness of understanding.

At worst, we live in total spectacle. Reference to origin becomes increasingly myopic and eventually nonexistent as we become amnesiacs who can only live in a fleeting present. Any search for essence, substance, and being becomes futile, as we are confronted by the absence of those things from

ourselves and the objects that fill our world. We come to understand that there is only surface image, social construct, and appearance that creates meaning, subject to continual turnover and refreshing. Our lives become itinerant amid these ever-shifting constellations by which we locate ourselves, and we must accept that the only truth is in these temporary and superficial posturings. We would live in homes with hollow, cardboard ikea furniture, the husks of dreams that echo dreams.

In this scenario, the fundamental emptiness of meaning in ourselves and the world is far from the worst danger. We would be threatened more those who control the technologies and infrastructures that provide us with renewed meaning time and time again, whose motives may be more for personal gain and control

of others. In a world of empty bodies waiting to be filled and refilled with meaning, our senses of such meaning and of value or identity are more vulnerable than ever to the suggestions of people with control over the movement and dissemination of the images that calibrate these senses.

But this is a vision of the worst. At best, our acceptance of emptiness and the totality of image represents a coming of age where we have begun to understand our transformative potential as humans—that technologies and materials of reproduction have become extensions of our linguistic slippage, ungluing culture from nature and desire from necessity. What appears as existential uncertainty is actually the beginnings of reimagination of the world to accommodate the desires of any and all. Of course this is threatening to

those who rely on past hegemonies of meaning, for reasons of stability, comfort, or advantage. To such people, temple skueomorphs and the stylistic deviations of Hip Hop slang alike enact lies, betraying the supposed essence of an original and obscuring some truth of a thing. But these developments and technologies do not hide a truth, they merely tell a different one: meaning and essence have always been a flexible creation of people, which our historical use of plastic materials and technology has helped us recognize, explore, and democratize. Those materials, more than how they reveal the divorce between meaning and matter, are also emblematic of what technology promises us: the ability to directly alter the world and ourselves in literally any way—to create an infinite reality.