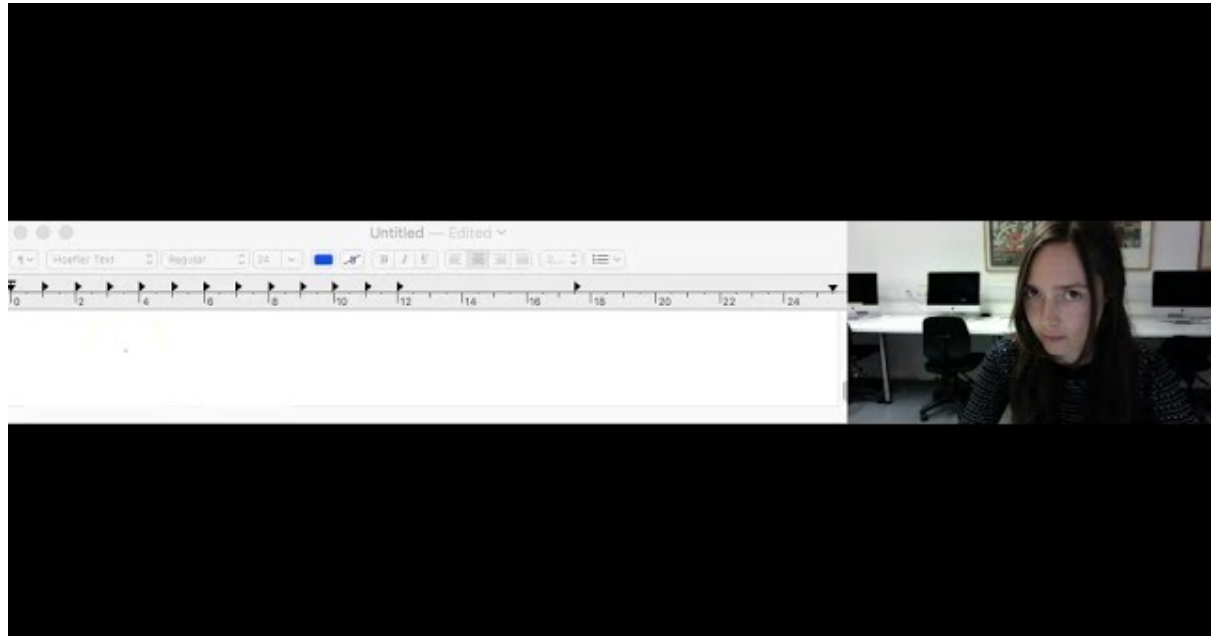


Becoming a Line

Examining distributed agency through lines found in drawing, theatrics and novel writing



Anomaline (video: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1879534845/anomaline>)

Like many other artists, I work in lines.¹ So much so in fact, that my artistic practice seems to revolve around trying eagerly to become a line myself.

The line is a bendy concept that seems to *lend itself* to many a cultural function, from cardiograms, to graceful Da Vinci portraits of saintly faces, to cross-country road systems, lined paper notebooks and strings on an instrument.

“Lend itself”: I enjoy this inherent generosity of the line. It volunteers itself readily to bear meanings, to be used, to be deployed in all manner of shapes that matter. It offers itself up to culture to spin itself a cocoon out of intricate threads. As an artist, I spend a lot of time analysing the lines that connect images, music, symbols, cinematic moments, throughout history, wondering why certain marks on a drawing, simple gestures in a dance or specific sequences of words strung together make me feel quite so *much*, or even seem to impart a sense that I’ve learned something profound about the world.

Below are a few ways the line manifests itself as cultural scaffolding capable of bearing these complex associations. The images link to artworks that probe these qualities of the line. I then turn to a current art experiment that addresses this: a performative novel whose single living character is a “lethargic line”.

¹ Artists spanning the draughtsmen of early man in the caves of Lascaux up to French impressionists, to more contemporary ideations of artistic linework I’d like to expand upon, such as choreography, performance and writing.

The line as a connector

Lines figure in conceptualising networks emerging from modern alternatives to the traditional, representationalist world view.

What is impressive about our reality is its boundless complexity, which representationalism rationalises by claiming that the objective state of the supposedly fixed world, irrevocably becomes distorted by the human agent's biased faculties of perception.

Where a representationalist approach becomes preoccupied with questions of accuracy regarding world-representations,² studies in networks (such as neural networks) point to theories suggesting such complexity arises structurally, from layer upon layer of organisation, and that what is "intrinsic" to the elements of these systems is rather beside the point. Complexity *emerges* from new contexts supported by substrates of simpler systems. The lines in a network delineate *relations* between a network of nodes, and this, network theories purport, is its power.³

These imaginings are important because before being an artist, I am a node within a material-cultural network of malleable relations that delicately evolve. My "nodehood", my subjectivity, is characterised by my ability (and inevitability) to move around within a cultural spider web.⁴ I am caught up somewhere in its sticky strings; sticky relations corrupted by the slightest events. I try to see into its thicket.

To some extent I see how things are related. I know that the nostalgia and romantic appeal of vinyl records, or 16mm film is somehow related to their obsolescence. I could perhaps trace the appeal of tanned skin colours within Western societies to a kind of exoticism or fetishisation of the emancipated woman of colour through musical expression and subsequent fame. In most cases, I cannot have the confidence to declare these connections as cause-effect relationships; rather, they come as the intuitive knowledge of any agent whose condition as node with network subjects them repeatedly to the nuanced tessellations vibrating along all these strings of commonality.

Where an artist is known to get frustrated in academic or media contexts in which they are asked to elucidate the details of their process or even declare how their activities intervene in culture, it may be that this is precisely because an artistic practice tends to involve a lot of

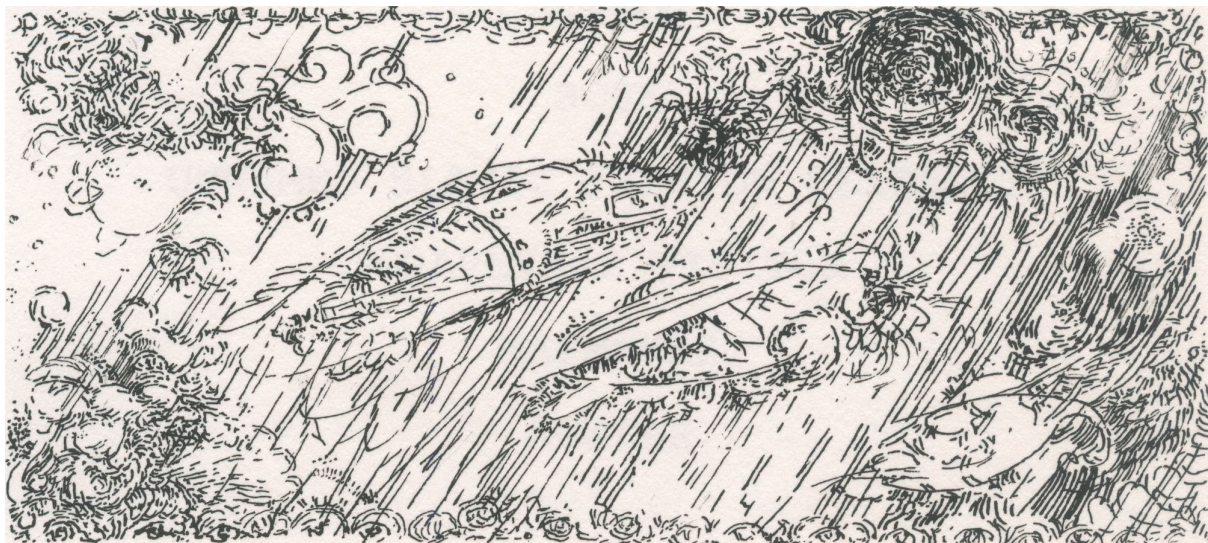
² According to this view, things like "truth", "reality" and "essence" become inherently tragically unattainable, and to interact with the real things of the world we depend on mediators that refer to those real things that we will never see as they "actually" are: words, scientific representations, art, stories, imagination. For a representation must necessarily be an economical reduction of the "real, objective world" to act as a useful mediator, and so, "how to do justice to the latter's complexity?" is a question frequently raised in debates with a representationalist presupposition.

³ There are a myriad of studies applying network models to understand complex systems, from neural networks and their mysterious relation to the conscious mind, to quantum physical relationships and the macro phenomena observed in galaxies. There are studies of social networks built up overtime on the internet, and networks of kinship in human societies, and trade networks, and networks of relations between species in an ecosystem, and networks concerning cultural production and authorship which interest me in particular.

⁴ It is important to note that the grand scale of this sticky mess of co-dependent entities transforming as a result of their evolving relations, is entirely composed of lines that are completely contingent and not at all random, though a spider web as intricate as that may indeed look very messy.

listening, a lot of learning about and staying attentive with the nuances of what a colour, line, gesture, or phrase presently means, though not necessarily *why* or *how* they mean these things.⁵ The strands of historical trajectories leading to such emotional responses are too impossibly innumerable and subtle to apprehend analytically and individually.

To an artist, the products of culture are incredibly potent. Colours and words and movements are in some literal respects also very cheaply available, and yet, can *mean the world*. To make an artwork is therefore always possible, but hardwon. The artist must spend a great deal of time listening to the resonances plummeting around our material-cultural network and hone in on the patterns of their complex arrangements, in order to make complex arrangements of their own (although often, I would emphasise, hardly knowing how or why they work). It is precisely an intuitive and not analytical approach to learning about what things mean, which allows a node access to meddle with it in coherent ways.⁶



⁵ What a quality such as the ones listed here “means” is taken not as an essential state of meaning, but rather as what these qualities *do* when revisited in context; how they affect their neighbouring nodes and change the shape of the network in any small or large way. Employing, in other words, performative accounts of realism to approach the question of what and how things mean. In this I reference most recently physicist and philosopher Karen Barad, who is the first I have come across to cross reference theories of relativity and realism that have emerged in both the humanities and natural sciences. See her book “Meeting the Universe Halfway” for an account of realism that considers at once the ontological, epistemological and ethical implications of theories from either side of the disciplinary dichotomy, claiming that the three can no longer be considered separately.

⁶ For example, a basketball player doesn’t know exactly what physical conditions need to be in place for her to move in such away that the ball leaves her hands and enters the hoop - and endeavouring to approach the task from this angle would probably delay any success for a long time. Instead, she develops a shorthand form of knowledge as muscle memory, much like the artist’s feeling for the potency of certain aesthetic or narrative arrangements, by learning through trial and error what kind of action leads to what kind of outcome - rather than focusing on the step-by-step causal chain that leads to an outcome such as scoring.



Empathy Drawing (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/katarina-rankovic/albums/with/72157665976029993>)

The minimalism of line

Now look at its anatomy. In a line, a boundary awakens. A minimal gesture of discernment, a constitutive mark of “here, there”. Is it this binary quickhand that makes it an apt unit of difference with which to start making meanings?

The line as a character without character

Though it may be incredibly thin, a line also has a surface. It can take shape, it can move, and is so infinitely endowed with joints that it could pretty much contort into anything - mimic any hand grasping a pencil, mimic any voice with its bodily waveform, pulsating at just the right frequency. Is the line that perfectly characterless plane along which a quality can become alive, like a forcefield accommodating a wave - the guitar string that quivers with a new voice once plucked to exhibit a certain shape, a distinctive way of being a line? Or the lines waiting to come out of my pen as my hand hovers above a page - are they anticipating the acute nuances of my wrist to shapeshift into manifestations of its physical habits and speak of histories from which they are born?



Vernacular Spectacular (<https://vimeo.com/channels/vernacular>)

The line as genealogy

Indeed, the mechanism of meaning in that moving wrist that draws, is tied to a staggering lineage. Drawing is a threadbare mode of expression in the way it comes across so literally and yet so monumentally. It is indeed a trace, the trace of a moving limb. But what one can gauge from this diagram is not so singular as the information to be taken away for something like a cardiogram, as Nelson Goodman notes.⁷ He writes that the significance in the outline of Hokusai's Mt. Fuji is much more replete in what it has to say (though its peaks and troughs may indeed resemble the waveform in a cardiogram); we cannot locate what it is that must be taken away from this line. It is in fact, an extremely *economical* line. It denotes far too much about the complex history of the hand that wrought it, and the history that succeeds it and rewrites it.

The line as a script

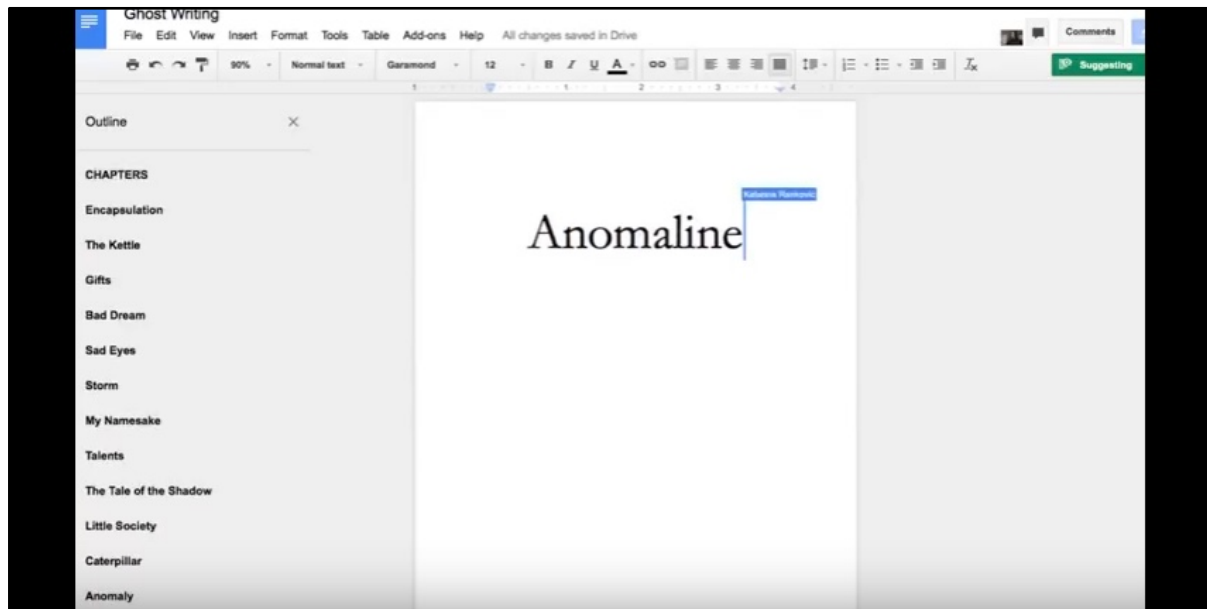
A DNA strand is but another powerful example of a performative instance carrying with economic dexterity such colossal historical baggage and consequence. It is a script; an instructive text that cellular ribosomes better follow carefully. And yet the outcomes of this instruction, though coherent with its predecessors, produce far from predictable consequences, thanks to layers of contingency above and below the cellular world.

And of what does a singular line speak? What histories does it recount, and what repercussions does it bear for the future of the malleable network of which I am a part? If a line is a kind of scripture that respectfully inherits its past only to propose a newfangled future, it is a mechanism that is possible to tap into, to intervene in and meddle with, as geneticists have by now well discovered.

⁷ "Languages of Art" (1968)

Anomaline

Perhaps the newfangled feats in bioengineering research can be compared to the kind of half-savvy treatment an artist applies to cultural artefacts and meanings; perhaps the desire to observe the mechanisms of a line can be expressed in an art experiment such as *Anomaline*.



Anomaline (video: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1879534845/anomaline>)

Anomaline is an experimental, unfinished novel that exists as an openly accessible document online which I occasionally write into.

It's lone, depressive character wakes up at the beginning with no recollection of its own personality. It is slowly becoming apparent that this is because it's being written into existence by the textual world of the novel itself. In effect, this anti person is something like a line: a characterless thing that can bend and imitate and take on the shape of all manner of other things.

With this highly impressionable creature left to its devices in the petri dish of the novel, I return from time to time to observe her taking on new guises, imitating her world and emerging affected, changed, and bearing *qualities*. I even let myself slip my fingers through the gloves of her fictional contours, and navigate the world of the unravelling novel in her avatar.

At present, this half-written novel is becoming available to public observation, and the line-entity within it is beginning to run amok and make decisions I hadn't quite approved of. The online exchanges between author, reader and character will form the nexus of its theme, elucidating and probing some of the distributed agency invested in the existence of this story about a lethargic line.

Visit this [Kickstarter page](https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1879534845/anomaline?ref=user_menu) (https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1879534845/anomaline?ref=user_menu) to support and witness the evolution of the experiment.