

AT CROSS PURPOSES

REFLECTIONS ON CONSTELLATIONS



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Nils Bloch-Sørensen, Anders Bille Petersen, Aisha Pagnes, and Carla Luisa Patrizii.

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INTRO

When gazing at the night sky together with someone, it can be challenging to guide the other person's attention to a specific star or cluster. To completely follow the alignment of the eyes and the tip of the index finger to the object in mind would require us to climb into the other, to see the world through their eyes. How do we know if we have the same star in mind as the person next to us? Are we talking *at cross-purposes*?

The process of writing *About the Artistic Vernacular of Poetry* has been an exercise as well as a challenge to formulate the artistic approach that we have been developing in our collaborative art practice over the recent years. Our contribution to this publication is created in tandem with the artworks in the exhibition *At Cross Purposes*.

For this publication, we have invited a group of artists, musicians, art historians, and philosophers to contribute with a text from their respective perspectives, related to the artistic approach we are working with.

Art historian and musician Nils Bloch-Sørensen and art historian Anders Bille have contributed the text *Art Anxiety*, which is a condensed version of an extensive research paper on existential anxiety as a way of approaching artistic experiences.

The poem *Enodia's Shipwreck* by philosopher and artist Aisha Pagnes, and poet and mathematician Carla Luisa Patrizii can be read as a poetic meditation on the implications of the loss of that which once provided one with meaning in the swirling torrent of the world.

Collections of scattered objects and concepts occupy a central point in our artistic practice. *Point* here, can also be thought about in its verb form, *to point* or *pointing*, and this offers a particular perspective on the process of this project: this form refers to the act of setting out a direction rather than to a specific point.

About the Artistic Vernacular of Poetry points in different directions rather than making a clear point.

ABOUT THE ARTISTIC
VERNACULAR OF POETRY

Janne Schipper & Andreas Sahl Andersen

REACHING AND MISSING: CONSTELLATIONS

Can you hear me?

Yes, yes, I can hear you.

Ok, great.

How was your day?

Yes, good, good. How was yours?

Yes, also fine.

Okay, let' s start.

I got a letter. I didn' t expect one. I don' t remember if I even wrote one to begin with. But now I have one, on cream coloured paper, thicker than printing paper.

We bridge a distance; over many roads, I fly and end up in the mountains. It' s chilly, and everything is kind of blue and green. Something eerie about the mountains slowly fusing with the sky. In grey cloaks, they recede from sight, now and again brightened by the cold blue and white of the full moon, contrasted by the orange and red traces of the sun that sank behind them.

As a little bouncing beetle, the car ascended into the foggy mountains. Green and capricious, they unfolded corner by corner, curve by curve. What was first a yellow road now gradually degraded into what could only be called a horse trail. On one side, an immense stone wall cast a shadow over our path, covered at times by moss, shimmering in the light of the several streams that found their way down into the depths gaping on the other side of us. Gradually, the rock formations enclosed around us, leaving behind the feeling of endless density unravelling in circular motions. The road, becoming more and more rough, increasingly asked more from the body, as if physical labour was necessary for the car to climb the mountains. All muscles tense and stiff, while the rest of the body surrendered: like jelly, bouncing on the back seat. The green world grew, as more plants came into view, flourishing in the humid clouds. Our beetle car disappeared into the snake roads of the mountains. With systematic gestures, our driver swept his hand over the rearview-mirror, keeping the hanging cross from falling off as it swayed in time with the bumps in the road. Higher and higher, climbing for hours, contours emerging out of the fog.

From the green heart into a mist that obscured my vision and swallowed the shyly vanishing shapes. The nose of the vehicle dove into the void, which appeared as **no - thing** more than a white wall. All that remained were boulders placed by time and force as accidental compositions.

Somehow, half of what I read wasn't in this letter, but it exists like that in my memory. This letter in my memory counts an indefinite amount of pages, functioning as a catalyst for all kinds of other recollections and experiences.

I only got this letter once, but as bedrock she shows again and again, and a bean rolled out of the letter - Pythagoras worshipped them...

...and the plants smell so sweet,
and the mountains appear so blue, and then -
fragmented pieces of an arm appear,
overlapping, a blur - there they are,
a myriad of chests and fingers, mouths and words.
Every sentence that came turned inside,
a thousand images reverberate in my voice
from the intertwined strands of bodies - a Gordian knot,
twisting with hands like fans groping,
not knowing which is beginning or end.

In the novel *Flights* (2007), by Polish author Olga Tokarczuk (born 1962), the nameless protagonist of the novel narrates a string of more or less related vignettes.

This genre-crossing cluster of memoir, fiction, history, and essay, is inaugurated by the disorienting condition of the seven-league boots of modern air travel, in which the journey between A and B is obscured by the mode and velocity of transit. Similarly to taking the metro when visiting a new town, the places where you pop-up when resurfacing above ground remain secluded, floating in a void, disconnected from each other. The structure of the novel adapts to this sense of travel: leaping from one place to another, revisiting, recalling, a nonlinear experience that conjures a feeling of chaos and frenzy. She calls the result of this narrative approach a *constellation novel*.

“When we gaze upon the stars, where we see bright points dispersed at random, our minds perceive this chaos as some form of orderly structure. This order isn’t objectively there, only in our heads, and we project it onto the sky.”¹ The structure of the book, so to say, offers the stars in the sky, the reader connects them.

The scientific world view makes for a somewhat similar analogy. We know that the stars in a certain cluster are indeed extremely far apart; that the light we see was emitted long before our prehistoric ancestors were mythologising over them; that they are so far away that we measure their distance in how far their light travels in an earth-year; that each star is the centre of gravity of another solar system with numerous planets and moons; that the mass of astronomically large objects cause ripples in the very fabric of spacetime. How the constellations appear to us only tells us something about where we are located in the universe – i.e. what seems close to us is infinitely far away from another perspective. We are indeed the last point in the constellations.

I walk into my room. From the floor rises a damp smell. It’s late at night and I’m watching, waiting, listening. The darkness and quietness is a tangible experience. The silence turns into a soft hum in my ears. Like a photograph taken in the dark, I make up pixels of things that do not exist. Outlines move slowly, swaying in the anonymity of the black corners of the room. I am waiting for the petals of a flower to fall. It’s hanging from the shelf’s edge; its glass vase is too small. I saw it happen but had to see it again to believe it: a constellation occurred. Then for the first time. All the specks on the wall and the dust on the books and the pen in my hand and the petal that fell.

“There was always something behind everything, behind Lena’s hand there was Louis’s, behind that cup there was a glass, behind that line in the ceiling there was an island, the world was like a moving screen that led you on from one partial revelation to another, it was playing with me as if with a balloon.”²

About his novel *Cosmos* (1965), the Polish author and philosopher Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969), wrote:

“The main theme of the novel is the very formation of this story, in other words, the formation of a reality [...] in it we see how a certain reality endeavours to arise from our associations, indolently, awkwardly [...] in a jungle of misunderstandings and erroneous interpretations. And at each moment, the awkward construction is lost in chaos.”³

The protagonist discovers a series of anomalies, minimal and imprecise; a sparrow hung from a wire, a piece of wood hung from a thread, cracks in the ceiling pointing like arrows, a shaft, a beautiful mouth, and a hideous one, etc. Separately, they are hardly of any significance, but when strung together in the mind of the protagonist, they form a constellation. The events gain significance in their interrelatedness. Who hung the bird? And then why hang a piece of wood? What are the arrows pointing at? What mystery is hinted at? In order to unravel the mystery, the protagonist starts to stir the waters to see if the responsible person will come forward. In a treacherous and perverse act, his inner world floods his outer, when he strangles a cat and hangs it from a hook.

“Cosmos is black, primarily black, something like a black stream, turbulent, full of whirlpools, obstacles, and flooded areas, carrying a mass of refuse, and, in this stream, a besotted man, at the mercy of the waters, trying to decipher and to understand so that he can assemble what he sees into some whole.”⁴

Gombrowicz argues that an underflowing current of human nature, which he calls the *formal imperative*, compels us to complete incomplete forms when they present themselves. In this context, we don’t think of form in the narrow sense of visual shape or the configuration of objects, as we often do in art, but more broadly in the sense customary or correct methods of procedure, following social conventions, and further how these forms shape us. When you have said “A,” we are inclined to say “B”. The causal nexus can be regarded as a formal imperative, since convention dictates for this to be upheld. In our immediate experience of reality, simple causality is so evident that we tend to infer it onto more dubious and complex matters. Superstitions and conspiracies have this type of imperative form. Even when we experience black swans, force majeure, etc., events whose causes can’t entirely be determined (like the weather), we as human beings have a strong inclination for inscribing them within this causal type of reasoning.

“We feel that even if all possible scientific questions can be answered, the problem of life [what is life?] has still not been touched at all. But of course there is then no questions, and just this is the answer”, notes Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) towards the end of his philosophical work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921).

Even though he revised many of his ideas in his later lectures and books, the opinion that the scientific framework is not appropriate everywhere, and certainly not for philosophical investigations, remains relatively consistent.

That “[t]he existence of the experimental method makes us think we have the means of solving the problems which trouble us; though problem and method pass one another by.”⁵

If we relate this to the previous, the experimental method (meaning we can infer a generality from repeated experiments) can be seen as a formal imperative. The *craving for generality*, as Wittgenstein puts it, lures the philosopher (and others, artists?) to blindly trust the logical form and a-priori discoveries that philosophy is able to make, and he considers this reductive and unifying tendency to be “the real source of metaphysics.”⁶

Instead, he believes that “[p]hilosophy just puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.—Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain.” And further that the task of philosophy is simply “to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.”⁷ By this is meant that it is through the analysis of the deceitful capacity of language that the philosopher can disclose the traps of senseless formulations. “Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is.”⁸

I lie on the small terrace of grass. The pines across the stream tower darkly at the edge of the horizon.

Like people waiting in line.

It has been a warm, very warm day. Only now that **every**—thing falls into shadows, the plants let out their final breath for the day. The grass is already wet and the sky scatters all its diamonds. Like it always does. It does not mean something to me. I pierce my eyes into a depth that appears flat. On this globe, I am a little hill of 30 centimetres height. Attached to its soil, protruding small lumps. My eyes keep travelling. Plato saw eyes as organs shooting rays at an object, until they hit something; trying to focus. My eyes cannot shoot. I’ m being shot. By thousands of lights getting lost somewhere along the way.

Then at some point, the nothingness floats to the surface, like oil on water. It doesn't mix with the rest, but it has always been there. A vermiform appendage, two bodies, identical, that form when you cross your eyes.

ALIEN REFLECTION: NAVIGATING NARRATIVES

“I was seized with a strange worship, not, surely of the star, that mere furnace which mere distance falsely sanctified, but of something other, which the dire contrast of the star and us signified to the heart. Yet what, what could thus be signified? Intellect, peering beyond the star, discovered no Star Maker, but only darkness; no Love, no Power even, but only Nothing. And yet the heart praised.”⁹

– Olaf Stapledon, *Star Maker*, 1937

Our experience, as we travel through life, could be imagined as resembling odd shaped patterns; circling repetitive motions. Experiences, understandings, moments, dreams, etc., compile into intricate structures: an encounter can reopen a landscape of associations, emotions, and information, like a prism reflecting and refracting incoming light.

This nonlinear manoeuvring, revisiting, reconsidering, and recalling (and suppressing), is a way for us to make sense of things. It can even be claimed that it is how we understand ourselves.

In Donna Haraway’s (born 1944) book *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), she incites the reader to reconfigure its relationships with (or narratives regarding) the earth and all its inhabitants. As an alternative to using the appropriated geological term *Anthropocene* (which was initially suggested to describe a new geological epoch, yet ended up encompassing a much wider field than geology), Haraway proposes a more mystical variation. In what she calls the *Chthulucene*, the human and nonhuman are inextricably linked in tentacular practices.

Haraway uses *narration* to propose recomposed relations: “String figures are like stories;” she writes allegorically, “they propose and enact patterns for participants to inhabit, somehow, on a vulnerable and wounded earth.” The allegory of playing with string, connecting fingers to form patterns (can you make the cat’s cradle?), but expanded to encompass everything and everybody with whatever limbs possible, points and pointers, creates a powerful image very reminiscent of the act of mapping out star constellations in the sky, connecting dots with lines to represent something known. In this causal network of interconnected beings (or in her words *critters*), any movement creates ripples, in constantly changing patterns.

She writes that this game “is about giving and receiving patterns, dropping threads and failing, but sometimes finding something that works, something consequential, and maybe even beautiful, that wasn’t there before, or relaying connections that matter, of telling stories in hand upon hand, digit upon digit, attachment site upon attachment site, to craft conditions for finite flourishing on terra, on earth.”⁹

The plurality that Haraway talks about is much like the human condition of plurality which Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) describes in *The Human Condition* (1958). Plurality here refers to both equality and distinction: that we as human beings are all part of the same species, that we are sufficiently alike to relate and understand each other, yet each with a unique biography and perspective on the world. “It is by virtue of plurality that each of us is capable of acting and relating to others in ways that are unique and distinctive, and in so doing of contributing to a network of actions and relationships that is infinitely complex and unpredictable.”¹¹

Haraway takes this much further by imagining this network encompassing all species on earth (and possibly beyond).

From the realisation that this “vulnerable and wounded earth,” which we inhabit, is very complex, with intricate connections criss-crossing in all directions, follows that we can’t see ourselves as dislodged. We are in the plurality.

We are in the world: we are all “mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”

And that this calls for a reconsideration of the position we inhabit in this massive game of *string figures* (can we make the cat’s cradle?).

It requires of us “to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures.” To let fascination mix with worries, dreams, knowledge, joy, despair, and to articulate grey-tones that tend to be gagged by strong, consequent, dualistic voices. To face complexities without the urge to simplify and model the towering predicaments into concrete and unambiguous understandings with equally simple solutions. How will we think back on our time?

Prosperous, fractured, fragmented, complex, disorienting, polarised, chaotic, promising but disappointing, run amok, unreal reality, better? Haraway proposes for us to “stay with the trouble”. That “[o]ur task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places.”¹²

On the banks, the water laps gently against
the wet trunks of the trees.
In the dark caverns of twisting roots, the sludge of
decayed leaves heave.
We’re on the hunt. In a small boat among the reeds.
Our soft bodies burn and shiver.
In the words I speak, the images unfold and flow
from their beds into the floodplains.
When I take my hands from the water, they are
swollen and red.
Exposed roots speak of an earlier flood.

But I can't find myself, and my body is not there but here.
Impact scars appear unknown.
The sun shines scorching again, how do I know I find you
in my words, when my body has already left the place
and the roots speak, but I cannot hear them.
I can't be sure, but when I smell the ditches next to
the highway, there's something I remember.

The poet Clarice Lispector (1920–1977) struggled to come to terms with the scattered nature of what eventually turned into the book *Água Viva* (1973). Benjamin Moser writes in the introduction:

“*Água Viva* does not [have a backbone], and this initially made Clarice uneasy: ‘That book, I spent three years without daring to publish it, thinking it would be awful. Because it didn’t have a story, it didn’t have a plot.’ The question of what exactly she was writing preoccupied Clarice.”¹³

Moser then continues that not despite, but *because* the book didn’t have a story or a plot, it inspired many young authors in Brazil. Her “spineless writing is not random, or even abstract. Instead, its consistency more properly belongs to the realm of dreams, in which ideas and images connect with a logic that may not be immediately apparent but is nonetheless real.”¹⁴

There is something about the form of a book with its condition of inescapable linearity, that clashes with certain modes of thought. How can we practise *tentacular thinking*, when the form it has to fit into gives the impression of what it tries to counter? It easily becomes forced, especially when it comes to thoughts and poems of a scattered nature. In the preface of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* we read about a similar struggle:

“After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts soon grew feeble if I tried to force them along a single track against their natural inclination. And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For it compels us to travel criss-cross in every direction over a wide field of thought.”¹⁵

The formal imperative of a book commonly impels authors to assume certain types of narratives that utilise a specific set of techniques and arcs to move towards a climax or conclusion. This narrative structure is the “backbone,” Benjamin Moser talks about.

The term *narrative* is borrowed from narratology, which is concerned with arts related to spoken or written language. In recent years, it has also been appropriated by other fields of research, such as cognitive narratology (the psychological approach to narrative), and more widely as a term used to describe cultural values, interpretations, beliefs, or simply just content (in art).

When we use the term narrative in the context of visual art, it should be clear that we don't necessarily mean *story* in the literary sense, but that we rather mean it in a sense more closely connected to the definition of cognitive narratology. It deals with how we make sense of experiences – structuring and comprehending the world.

The literary scholar and critic, Marie-Laure Ryan, “distinguishes between ‘a narrative’ as an object that can be clearly defined and the quality of narrativity, which means ‘being able to inspire a narrative response.’”¹⁶

In her view, a narrative is not just something which is given, but also something which is invoked: connecting what we encounter to the landscapes of associations within ourselves by using narratives as sensemaking instruments.

With Haraway's string figure analogy (requiring giving and receiving) in mind, as a way to deal with complex structures, Ryan's distinction opens up the possibility in art to work with narrativity as a means of engaging with and relating to the infinitely complex and unpredictable game of string figures.

I see them again and again. Every year they appear,
and I hear the sentence I wrote the first summer:
Under grey clouds, purple petals emit lilac light.
The apple trees across the garden hide secrets from me.
Then she said - turned, reflexed, swayed,
swiftly moved, and grabbed my cheeks.
But not before, in broad daylight,
hide little eyes among the leaves and branches,
so at every - it blinks in my direction.
A breast and chest and hair like wood.
Small, powder-shaped, and clayed, melted together,
but I know the difference.

With regards to “spineless” creation, we can ask the question: what was it that sparked Clarice Lispector’s initial apprehension? Following the beaten path equips the creator with a measuring tape to somewhat estimate the quality of the creation. The toolbox that the development of storytelling has equipped us with is suddenly inadequate when deviating from the norm.

In *Against Interpretation* (1966), Susan Sontag (1933–2004) addresses the Greek legacy of art as *mimesis*, and its subsequent need of defence:

“[I]t is the defence of art which gives birth to the odd vision by which something we have learned to call ‘form’ [as distinguished from Gombrowicz’s sense of the term] is separated off from something we have learned to call ‘content’, and to the well-intentioned move which makes content essential and form accessory.”¹⁷

It infers that understanding a work of art requires learning how to interpret in the right way, following the norm of art mimicking or signifying something specific that can be revealed through interpretation. Following this form of understanding, “[i]nterpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there.”¹⁸ In Sontag’s understanding, interpretation means taking the *position* of dictating and controlling the supposed meaning of an artwork, by piercing through presumed shrouding layers of form, to get to the sub-content.

Sontag urges to replace the hermeneutics of art with an *erotics of art*. Relating the artistic to the erotic experience, where satisfaction cannot reasonably be accounted for without simply answering with a tautology: it feels good when you touch me there, because it feels good.

This unaccountability for the reaction to an artistic experience is reviewed similarly in the introduction to the anthology *Beauty* (2009). Artist and author Dave Beech (born 1954) writes about our apprehension towards form, and specifically towards beauty. He refers to Paul Ricoeur’s (1913–2005) *hermeneutics of suspicion*, which was inaugurated by the works of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, and which stresses that statements made by individuals with regards to their intentions, beliefs, and conduct cannot be accepted uncritically.

“The suspicion is that individuals are prey to forces that they cannot control: the individual is inserted into social structure.”¹⁹ Beech states:

“We continue to see beauty around us, but this can no longer be the kind of elevated experience that it once was. Beauty might seem like something that we know when we see it, but the hermeneutics of suspicion refers such experiences to hidden motives, unintended consequences, structural conditions and spurious rationalizations.”²⁰

With the consequence that “modern alienation has transformed beauty imminently. To imagine that we can make judgments without unintended consequences, or take pleasure without risking structural or ideological complicity and culpability, is to conjure up a hermeneutics without suspicion.” The fear is that if we, through art, attempt to express what we cannot adequately utter with words, guided by attraction to forms and traits that might be labelled beautiful, the unaccountability of the artistic choices, and the suspicion that these choices are made on the basis of externally ingrained inclinations, should be cause for valid concern. Yet we find ourselves in a creative deadlock when refraining from getting involved. Are we running some ideological or commercial errand that we are not aware of?

In answer to the predicament, Beech coins an *aesthetics of suspicion*, in which beauty gains a performative aspect and is rather “expanded, twisted, shifted and split” by its political implications. It needs to be neither “purely subjective nor reduced to the social relations to which certain dominant cultural configurations are attached”. Beech suggests beauty as “a fluid variable rather than a fixed attribute.”²¹ This view exhibits an anti-essentialism, similar to the linguistic understandings of Wittgenstein. The different instances where the term beauty is used, can shed light on its concept: “To describe a set of aesthetic rules fully means really to describe the culture of a period.”²²

With a more relational interpretation of the concept, Beech argues that “beauty exists at the tense intersection of the individual and society, with the individual neither fully subsumed nor fully free from social norms [conventions] and cultural hierarchies. There is pleasure and play in that gap, as well as critique, suspicion and subversion.”²³

WAVERING SIGNIFICATION: SIGN, SIGNIFICATION, AND POSITIONING:

In *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008) and *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987), the french philosopher Jaques Rancière (born 1940) deals respectively with the relation between the artwork, the artist, and the spectator and, the relation between the schoolmaster and his pupils. Rancière describes the precarious position of the spectator in context of the performing arts (initially theatre), calling it *the paradox of the spectator*: on the one hand, the artwork is in need of a spectator, on the other hand, the spectator's relation to the artwork is one of dependency. "[T]o be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act."²⁴

In other words, this relationship can be seen as one of submission and domination. The artist takes the position of power and knowledge to act, and the spectator fills the position of viewing and submission.

Rancière regards the unequal relationship between the traditional schoolmaster and his pupils as having a similar dynamics of submission and domination: the didactic methods of the traditional schoolmaster is keeping the student in a position of ignorance regarding what they should or shouldn't know (a gulf separating teacher and student).

In order to overcome these dynamics, Rancière introduces the concept of the *ignorant schoolmaster*, which in turn emancipates the student. Similarly, it can be deduced that the *emancipated spectator* is somewhat in need of an *ignorant artist*. The idea of the emancipated spectator emerges from rejecting the conviction that there are such opposites as viewing and knowing, passivity and activity, analogous to the structure of domination and subjection.

“Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions.

The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place.

She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way — [...] with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented. They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them.”²⁵

Because of the distance between the artist, the artwork, and the spectator, there will never be a straight and uniform transmission of any kind. What the spectator feels or understands is not necessarily what the artist intends. The position of the spectator, their stories, and their trajectories become part of the

intricate complex that forms a *cons-tellation*. Not a hermetically sealed space, but a breathing organism that keeps the cell's engine running through secretion and absorption.

When we are taught in school to analyse literature or art, the method used mirrors the gulf of inequality that separates the teacher and pupil. This model of analysis establishes that we first have to treat the art in question on a formal level, with the teacher having the answers and the student attempting to close the gulf of knowledge separating them by learning the right answers and following the appropriate method. First, when these steps have been fulfilled, we advance into the associative and interpretive level of the analysis.

According to Rancière, the “poetic labour of translation is at the heart of all learning” — in other words: “relating signs to other signs and discerning their relation.”

In the context of art, the spectator shouldn't be tasked with deciphering the “real” intention of the artwork, to arrive at the “right” answer (closing the supposed *gulf* separating the artist and the spectator), but rather, “venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of

what they have seen”²⁶ It should be noted that Rancière here suggests turning the aforementioned model of analysis on its head; starting on the associative level and commencing from there.

The symbiotic relationship between the artwork, the artist, and the spectator can be looked at through the lens of semiotics.

What does Rancière talk about when he encourages us “to venture together into the forest of things and signs”? In the article *Intention and Interpretation in Art: a semiotic Analysis* (1974), philosopher Gary Shapiro (born 1941) describes our “constraint” to see some pattern or organisation in a work of art (much like the formal imperative). Shapiro suggests that the “the apparent puzzle [the artwork] becomes somewhat intelligible when we understand the work of art as a sign”. Shapiro uses the definition given by philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914): “a sign is something that stands for something to someone.” Shapiro elaborates: “a sign is contained or limited in meaning by its own nature and its

object, but open to interpretation because it must address some interpreter.” With this definition, the plurality of interpretations of a given artwork is taken into account, even though it is also under the influence of conventions and norms that either include or exclude the possibility of certain interpretations.

To treat the artwork as a sign is to consider it as “having an object or being a sign of something.” The formal qualities of the sign compels us to try to understand what it signifies, but “problems arise when we try to say what, in general, are the objects of art–signs and how it is that the sign represents its object?” The semiotic perspective on art does not satisfy this “craving for generality”.

“[W]hile the artist’s intention, as the object of the art–sign is a condition of the sign’s being meaningful, it is not identical with the sign’s meaning. [...] The sign’s meaning is what it will be interpreted as. In order to talk about the meaning of a work of art, then, we must talk about its interpretations.”²⁸

Whereas Sontag thinks of interpretation as a normative action (approached through the Greek tradition of interpretation), Shapiro argues that through the lens of semiotics, interpretation can also be a proliferation of meaning, rather than a normative constraint. A sign is “capable of giving rise to a multiplicity of interpretants at a given time and to an indefinite series of interpretants over a period of time.” A sign’s spatiotemporal instability, indeterminacy, and the indefinite variety of artistic purposes with no fundamental form of intention, makes an attempt to discern its original intention arbitrary. An artwork “is an opaque element which prevents interpretation from ever coinciding precisely with intention.” The “creative misunderstanding,” as Paul Valéry (1871–1945) calls it, arises exactly from the discrepancy between intention and possible interpretations, leading to the total interpretations far exceeding what the artist intended. “If art were or approximated to being a direct means of communication (as some have supposed) then the work would tend to be a disposable instrument which would be exhausted by achieving a definite effect.”

Within the artistic semiosis of the art installation (or constellation), it is important to consider what Charles Peirce calls a *logic of vagueness*. All objects in a specifically appointed space could foster narrative responses, but there is a distinction to be made between *trivially vague* and *richly vague*. The interrelation between the signs in an artwork matter, and their materiality and richness matter: "a sign in art may blend or condense several different aspects of signification."²⁹

I kept the gates anxiously closed
In the thick of the earth
Through the terminator like a ship
The echo rebounds and hears itself

Like the day that feigned to be night
So we embowed
A piece of the moon stolen by the shadow of ourselves
They fold inside out, inside themselves
folding until a small piece of inverted me remains
a soft skin, a warm skin - in the seed coat we sway
shrouded sea through the porthole

If I ask “does it make sense?” or if we exclaim, “it makes sense!”, what is to be made of it? What does it signify? In some common contextual circumstances, it is interchangeable with “do you understand?” and “I understand!”. Or related: “is it reasonable” or “is my reasoning correct or reasonable?” and “it is reasonable!”. So if a stockbroker explains a market analysis, and the reply is “it makes sense!” or the stockbroker asks, “does it make sense?”, it is rather clear how to understand it. On the other hand, if a heartbroken friend tells you about her struggles and you reply with “it makes sense...” it is clear that what is meant is more similar to “I feel you” – i.e. I can relate to your pain. It is implicit that “it makes sense” even though it doesn’ t make sense – even the senseless can make sense. It is as an expression of a mutual understanding or a treaty if you will. In other words, what is sought to be expressed is impossible to precisely express and is determined by the receiver’ s mentalisation and ability to empathise. The use of the expression is dependent (as is the case with all languages) on the context of its use.

When stating “it makes sense!” in the context of a contemporary work of art, how are we to understand the statement? Is it meant as “I understand” or “I feel you/it”? Or is it rather like a scale applied between the art as it is, the physical perception of it, and the associations that arise from this perception? An evaluation of to what extent the object(s) in question elicits the intended associative response in the experiencing individual?

If I instead would ask “what is the sense of the artwork?”, *sense* is interchangeable with meaning. It is here important to note that what belongs to the category of con-temporary art is not in any way uniform, and its norms and values (rules and conventions) are highly dependent on where you are in the world, which subgenre of art is in question, etc. For example, the meaning of the statement in relation to conceptual art or political art is different from the usage of it when we talk about something like abstract painting; what the word *sense* signifies must necessarily change in accordance with the artistic approach in question.

This recognition of the instability and context dependency of signs and their ability to foster narrative responses can help develop a less ethnocentric, patriarchal, post-co-colonial (or rather late-colonial), and religious approach, i.e. not only focussing on the western development of art, semiotics, etc. Accepting the instability of signs is also embracing diversity, emancipating all players in the game of string figures.

Somehow, like ants, we build a heap, finding small elements and placing them where it fits, making a giant cone shaped pyramid. But that those pieces come from a large pine, with roots deep, deep into the ground, part of a particular ecosystem, doesn’ t matter. Our anthill is floating in a void. And miraculously, within this story without beginning or end, the architectures we build function. They relate to the creatures in them, their measurements can be calculated, and their materials stacked and packed, brick by brick.

ENODIA' S SHIPWRECK

Aisha Pagnes & Carla Luisa Patrizii

Here, head on dry sand
Feet on wet sand
I lie limp-bodied
With the swelling sun

Limbs-spill-over-bodied
I lie at froth
Of wet tongues
At the folds
Of my feet with my thoughts
Charmed to visions
Like the blind must have:
Secret and remote

Not long before
I spoke with History
She offered reasons
For every event
For every preference
She taught me Art
Of myth
And Tragedy
And with these words
I woke up to fictions
And forgot to live
By rhapsodists
On their wings
Feast in the worlds
Of their words
And their beginnings

Thwarted images
Is what's left for me
Metaphors with a head
Feet, fingers and no heart
Fingers that point and name
That point and claim
And her memory
Loveful Diotima
Made vane

Net of Yam
Of mesh so fine
From dreamless wastelands
Into unkempt reality deliver me

How long before
My signposts, of my I -
How long before they give?

Wretched consciousness
Deliver me to my senses
Cut at the unkempt
With -at most- fuzzy incisions
And draw out The concept
Prolicide of the potential!

Yet it seems universal
Every creature
That cannot contain itself
In its own fullness
Draws itself together
Outside itself

Indeed, it does seem universal:
I, creature
That cannot draw myself together
In my own fullness
Draw myself
Outside myself

Hence the elevated miracle
Of the Word
That miracle
Of form that settles
And leaves a trace
Of form that breathes
And bears and bars my I
Strap-winged to this offal heart

Thus the Word
Formed in the mouth
Cannot remain itself
And to this
All I owe

ART ANXIETY

Anders Bille Petersen & Nils Bloch-Sørensen

Art has one fundamental characteristic that sets it apart from other man-made phenomena: it does not have a specific purpose.

Because of this, art always contains an element of *indeterminacy*.

This is not to say that we cannot see what is in the painting or understand the words on the page, but that a sense of doubt permeates the experience of a work of art, giving rise to questions like:

“What does this mean?”

“What is the purpose of this?”

“Why was this created?”

“How am I supposed to relate to this?”

The ability to make sense of the world is momentarily compromised when we encounter an art piece – we are thrown off course, so to speak. This doubt about the purpose of art presents us with a crisis of meaning, and the futile search for tangible answers gives the very creation and consumption of art a shade of absurdity. Yet artworks are capable of something... but what?

If all works of art contain an element of indeterminacy, a clear existentialist perspective emerges: art brings us into contact with something fundamental about our existence, namely, that it is our task to imbue the world with meaning – with all the moral and existential questions that this poses. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre provided one of the key quotes of existentialism when he declared that “existence precedes essence”.³⁰ While traditional philosophy considers a thing’s essence (its characteristics and purpose) to be more fundamental and permanent than the fact that it exists in the world, Sartre turns this relationship on its head and argues that human beings have to create their own values and determine the meaning of their lives themselves, since they do not possess any inherent identity or value prior to this. This means that we exist in the world before we define this existence. Objects, on the other hand, are derived from a model or a concept and are therefore defined by their function.

However, this is not the case with artworks.

It could be said that works of art are, in fact, the category of objects (and performances, etc.) that most closely resemble human beings.

An artwork also exists before it is endowed with meaning. It exists prior to being encountered by a spectator, but has no meaningful core at this point. It exists objectively, but what is it really?

And what is its function?

We are faced with something that exists, but has no essence – or at best an essence that is unclear and negotiable – and which becomes meaningful only when it is activated by the subjectivity of a spectator.

The indeterminacy we face in a work of art is the same indeterminacy we face generally in life.

After all, can life not be seen as an infinity of uncertainties around which we establish frameworks?

We differentiate between objects, we organise time linearly, we create and maintain traditions.

With language, we attempt to catalogue the world – the natural world, the man-made world, and even possible worlds beyond. We try to decipher and demystify what other people think and have thought.

We are curious, inquisitive creatures. And with good reason – without this all-consuming activity, human consciousness would shatter. We have erected all sorts of cultural and identity constructs to camouflage this premise, but many people will probably have experienced moments where the veil is pulled from our eyes and we are confronted with the fact that the complexes of meaning and signification we surround ourselves with are inherently unstable and man-made.

All the uncertainty and stimulation of our interpretive capabilities that we experience when confronted with a work of art can thus be understood as a reflection of a deeper existential uncertainty. A piece of art confronts our ability to interpret, asking each individual spectator to establish meaning in its chaos. This mental state can be a challenging space to occupy, and that is exactly why we will attempt to address it through the concept of *art anxiety*.

Our reason for choosing this term is that we believe profound aesthetic experiences can be described with reference to the anxious state put forth by Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard in his book *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), a theory which has since been adopted and elaborated by existentialists and phenomenologists such as Sartre and Martin Heidegger.

The Concept of Anxiety is centred around an analysis of the nature of sin, in which the original transgression in the Garden of Eden is seen as a kind of archetype for having to choose and ascribe meaning to the world on an individual level.

It was, however, clear to later philosophers that Kierkegaard's concept could have relevance far beyond its initial theological context. In existentialist thinking, anxiety occurs when we become aware of our personal freedom and the responsibility that accompanies it.

For us, the important aspect of Kierkegaard's theory on anxiety is not its relation to questions of sin, but rather its relation to the act of *choosing*, of having to make choices without reference to universal morality or systems of value.

So when we use the term anxiety, we are not referring to the anxiety disorders which some people suffer from, but to an existentialist philosophical concept, and Kierkegaard's theory has nothing as such to do with pathological anxiety.

The basic idea of *The Concept of Anxiety* is that the possibility of sinning can disturb us to such an extent that we come into contact with an awareness of the fact that we, as humans, are free to and responsible for making choices and creating meaning.

Kierkegaard anchors his reflections on anxiety in an analysis of the *Fall of man*, when Adam and Eve were tempted to eat from the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the following *original sin*, which denotes the Christian view that sinfulness is inherited by all descendants of Adam and Eve – that is to say, by all human beings.

Kierkegaard rejects the traditional interpretation of original sin that considers sinning to be something we are simply “programmed” to do. In his eyes, the concept of original sin deprives us of the responsibility for and freedom to the sins we commit, and makes sin a necessary consequence of being human.

Instead, he argues that sinning is a choice we make as individuals. Sin did not announce its presence in the human condition once and for all with the Fall of man, but rather does so each time an individual makes a sinful choice.

As a consequence of this, every person is responsible for the sins they commit, making sin a largely individual matter rather than a universal one.

According to Kierkegaard, sin enters the world every time a person passes from a category of innocence to a category of sinfulness.

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, the state of innocence is described as a state in which one has not yet become aware of one’s *spirit*.

Simply put, you could say that what Kierkegaard calls spirit, we might today call self-awareness, or awareness of one’s existence.

It is in the passage between these two categories, and in the budding recognition of one’s spirit, that anxiety occurs.

Kierkegaard distinguishes between anxiety and fear. Where fear relates to a specifically defined threat, anxiety does not have an object: there is, as such, nothing to be afraid of.

What causes anxiety is unclear, and he describes it as “freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility.”³¹ The possibility of possibility, that he is referring to, is not the possibility of something specific, but the very possibility of being free to choose an action or a value. It is the freedom (or the obligation) to choose, but not specifically what it is that can be chosen.

Whenever this possibility presents itself, so does anxiety. Because the field of possibility is open and can be anything, Kierkegaard and later existentialist philosophers describe it as a *nothing*. The possibility of possibility is not a clearly defined notion, but rather “a nothing – the anxious possibility of *being able*.”³²

In anxiety, we become aware of our existential freedom, the fact that we as individuals are responsible for making our own choices and for defining the meaning of our actions.

This implies that the scaffolds of meaning we have built around our realities fall to the ground. Our realities and our moral codes do not exist objectively outside of us – they are something we create, collectively and as individuals.

We are brought up in a world that is presented as given and natural, but which is actually to a large extent a product of human ideologies and our desire for order. We navigate by language, by man-made definitions, but at times cracks appear in this imperfect symbolic layer: ambiguous things evade description, phenomena are frustratingly inconclusive, taxonomies implode. All the cultural and metaphysical meaning we surround ourselves with does not exist before we as humans construct it, and it is this realisation that reveals itself in the anxious state – the ultimate freedom and the ultimate responsibility.

In our view, the existential anxiety described by Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Anxiety* is in many ways comparable with the mental state one can enter into when engaging with the indeterminacy of an artwork during profound aesthetic experiences, and it is this state we have termed *art anxiety*.

When confronted with a work of art, we come face to face with the possibility of the creation of meaning. It is a crisis of signification that forces us to make interpretive choices. The nature of the artwork is to be “a nothing,” and by sparking anxiety to resonate with the spectator’s subjectivity. In a state of art anxiety, we experience the birth of meaning within us and sense that the artwork commands us to create meaning, but not specifically what this meaning is supposed to be.

It is not something specific in the artwork, but the very nothingness that the artwork represents on account of its lack of definite purpose that provokes this anxiety.

A work of art does not communicate transparently; it is rather a gesture, an invitation. It points out directions, potentials – paths with unknown destinations, paved with associations that cannot be controlled. An art piece must be “reconstructed” every time it is encountered.

Each time anew, and each spectator in their own way. Artistic creativity is the act of charging an object, attributing meaning to it that is not inherent, and while the canvas might not actually be blank, it must still, on a mental and emotional level, be filled in by the spectator.

Art is a reflection or, you might say, a processing of the basic existential condition that meaning and signification is not something inherent in objects and living beings, but rather something that flows from human consciousness. What happens in moments of art anxiety is the exposure of the instability of signification, and the subsequent plasticity of reality.

Art anxiety is fundamentally no different from the existential anxiety outlined above, and art is by no means the only thing that can provoke it, but we use this compound noun to articulate how art can be a particularly potent gateway to this anxious state. To the uncovering of something fundamental about human existence. Artworks are well suited for this because they do not have a specific purpose that can obscure the fact that we must ourselves establish their meaning. An artwork must be attributed value, meaning, and direction in much the same way human beings and their situation must.

In both cases, there is an uncertainty about why and how they exist in the world. Art is particularly good at revealing this relativity compared to other phenomena within the framework of reality because it is fundamentally a crack in this framework.

We consider the creation and consumption of art to be rooted in a need to communicate our existential predicament. All art has a relationship to anxiety because the driving force behind creativity can be said to be anxiety. We are united by anxiety, and in every work of art there is a desire to process this. Naturally, other things can remind us of our existential situation, but when it enters the artistic framework, it becomes in a different way a conversation about this situation. It becomes a dialog between subjects: between the artist and the spectator, between different spectators, between the individual spectator and themselves. Anxiety is a common denominator, and artworks are spaces where our vulnerability can resonate.

While art anxiety can be overwhelming and disorienting, it should not be viewed as a negative emotional state but rather as an ambivalent one. The aesthetic situation can be uncomfortable because of its inconclusiveness, but anxiety can also be compelling – after all, it is the realisation of freedom and possibility. Kierkegaard himself addresses this ambivalence. He puts it in a slightly convoluted way, saying that anxiety gives rise to a simultaneous “*sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy*.”³³ In other words, the unknown, what Kierkegaard calls nothing, both attracts and repels us. Likewise, the void of meaning we confront in a work of art is simultaneously terrifying and alluring. It threatens us with potential annihilation (what if no meaning emerges?), but also opens the door to endless creativity.

The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty described the formation of meaning in art as follows: "Expression is like a step taken in the fog – no one can say where, if anywhere, it will lead."³⁴ Neither the mind that creates a work of art nor the mind that receives it is in complete control. When human beings express themselves, ambiguity, vagueness, and indeterminacy are inevitable. There are no perfect signs. When an artist manages to give form to something abstract, and again when the spectator is tasked with deciphering it, there will always be blind spots, confusion, and mix-ups. The lines of communication that exist between artist, artwork, and spectator are unstable. Associations branch out like wayward deserters, and art thrives in these communicational "glitches".

It is in many ways counterintuitive to seek out the unexpected and unpredictable, but we should cherish art's ability to create spaces of contemplation that allows us to confront the infinity of the mind, allows us to explore the twilight zones of signification, and the flexibility of interpretation. Spaces in which boundaries can dissolve, and our imaginations can roam without restraint across a borderless territory.

When the world around us is brought into the realm of art – this stronghold of indeterminacy – something happens to it: it becomes pliable, malleable; it allows itself to be seen from new perspectives; the rigidity of its constructs can be challenged, and new constellations formed. Art disrupts our fixed worldviews because the way it addresses us is decidedly antithetical to all that is static and stable. It doesn't communicate clearly but allows its openness to liberate something inside of us.

Let us pose an analogy.

Imagine a pile of fine sand lying on a surface. A gust of wind creeps in and grabs it. Watch it take off, the grains of sand swirling chaotically among each other. Watch it spread out and transform from a small pile into a large cloud before finally falling towards the surface from which it rose. The pile from before is gone. It was shattered by the wind. It was not stable, but merely a temporary constellation that now forms a new pattern. Transformed. Waiting for a new gust of wind. The wind may have a direction, but it cannot control where the grains of sand travel or how they settle when they land again.

Like the wind that grabs the grains of sand and propels them into the air, a work of art grabs our thoughts and lets them swirl among each other. Like dust dancing in a ray of sunlight, memories, reflections, dreams, and repressions tumble around inside the spectator.

An artwork merely sets a direction – a word, a sound, an atmosphere – without a specific destination and without any control over which “grains of sand” it will encounter in the spectator.

The wind is intangible. It is there, but it is difficult to map out; you need someone or something to detect it. Like the wind, art can only be felt when it grabs hold of something. Its power does not consist of a specific content or a defined set of objects, but of this gust of wind in the individual.

When we are in a state of art anxiety, when we feel a work of art engulfing and moving us, it is this swirl that we feel. This splintering of thought is not a journey to anywhere in particular, but rather a state in which our emotional patterns and habitual routes of thinking begin to dissolve. Art anxiety does not ask of us to obtain new knowledge, it asks us to be open to a destabilisation of our inner topographies.

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