THE HIDDEN BURDEN OF THE "PERSONAL OBJECT": A LINGUISTIC DIGRESSION

Šperk Stret 2022

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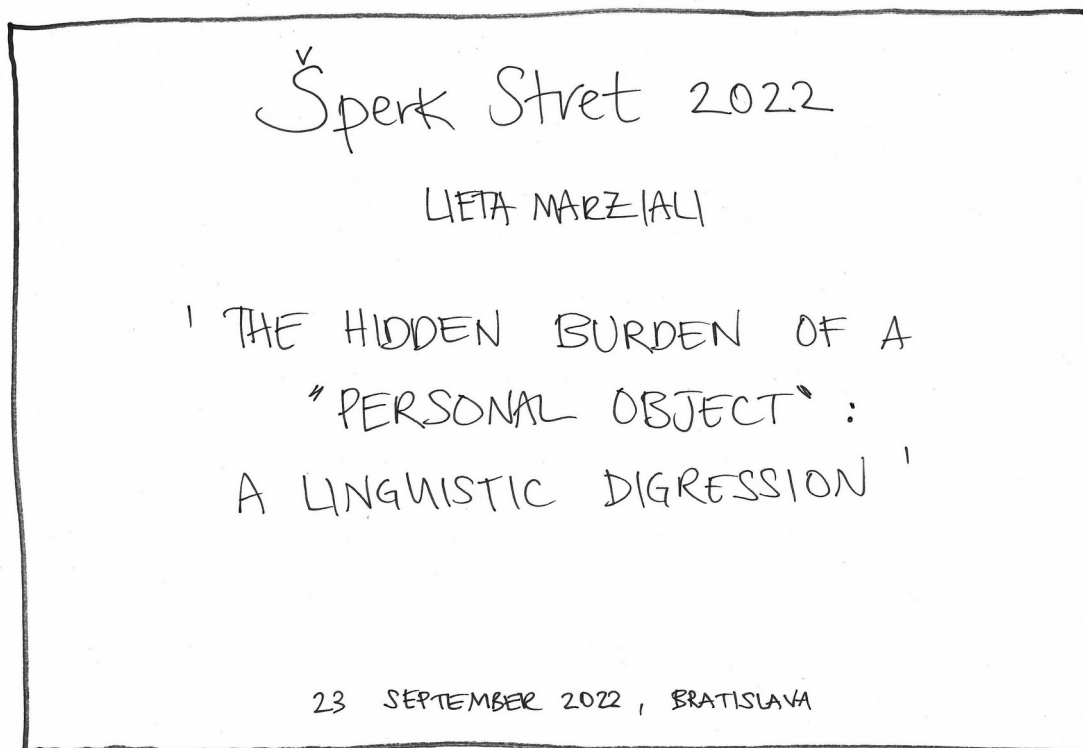
INTRODUCTION

First of all, thank you very much for inviting me to speak at this conference. It is so important to be able to come together to share research and thinking. For me personally, this also comes at a point of profound reassessment where more and more I am considering the role of objects in my practice, and the role of myself as a subject, and what it means to be an artist and to practise art.

In recent writing in the past two years, for the Nuda Vita project and in a major catalogue essay for the Cosmos project, which has ONLY just finally opened, I have been questioning what it means to live in a toxically anthropocentric world. So much is at last being said about toxic masculinity, and the negative impact it has not only on gender-based issues but on men themselves. In the same way, toxic anthropocEntrism is itself a product of a patriarchal capitalist system, and it has proven already for millennia to be cataclysmically damaging, not only to all that it sought to dominate, but also to the very species it sought to elevate.

In my Cosmos essay, which hopefully will be published soon, I sought to ask myself what is the role of art and artists in this kind of world. My argument there calls for art practice NOT to try and provide answers to the problems we are facing, but to be a practice of thinking and questioning, in a constant pursuit of all that is liminal. I argue that the purpose is not, which might seem counterintuitive, to solve the puzzle, but to understand that, like the challenges we face, the puzzle must be never-ending.

As part of this process of reassessment, I have been giving a lot of thought to the concept of art as a noun, as an object, that is somehow visible, tangible, (or perceived in another sensory way), quantifiable. This is a concept of art as product, and of artist as producer. As object, art is made, and the artist is the maker, or someone who controls matter. It is of course a perception of art that, while it still conceives of the artist as something genial and outside, fits immensely well in the accelerated patriarchal capitalist world in which we continue to live. This is the world that gives us all too common words such as "collection" and "material innovation". And it is also the same world that gives us the ubiquitous "open call". But more on that later...

And so what I would like to do today is to present this lecture as this *other* kind of "art". I would like to take you away from the discourse around jewellery, where more and more we are trying to analyse, categorise, and find conclusive definitions. Instead I would like you to embark with me on a digression in which we can ask ourselves questions: questions that by their very definition are never quite finite, and never fully measurable or quantifiable. Questions that, by their very definition, are not a product.

"PERSONAL OBJECTS"

In my own practice, I questioned from very early on what it meant to have available, to access, to appropriate and to intervene on materials, which are, of course, also considered within the realm of objects. At the beginning, my concerns were mostly of an environmental nature:
- What resources am I using? And what resources sho*u*ld I be using?
- Where do these resources come from, and what is the impact of the process of them becoming available to me as resources?
But there were also other concerns, which extended the environmental ones to more self-reflective, ontological ones:
- Who am I that I am able to use these resources, and what grants me the ability, as well as the right, to use them?

Mostly, however, I was concerned with how to be a jeweller, and for many years I did not fully appreciate that that very goal – and all the questions I just mentioned! – were in fact deeply deeply rooted in the very concept or definition of object and the dichotomy (but also the hierarchy!) between subject and object. This, naturally, put into question the very definition of subject, of what it is to be a subject, what it is to be a "maker", especially in a field where the so-called objects themselves, jewellery, are described as having such strong agency.

And so, to the theme of this conference: The Social Value of Personal Objects.

There is so much to unpack here.

My first reaction was that, if I needed to start somewhere, it would need to be from unpacking the term "personal object" itself. So that's where we will start.
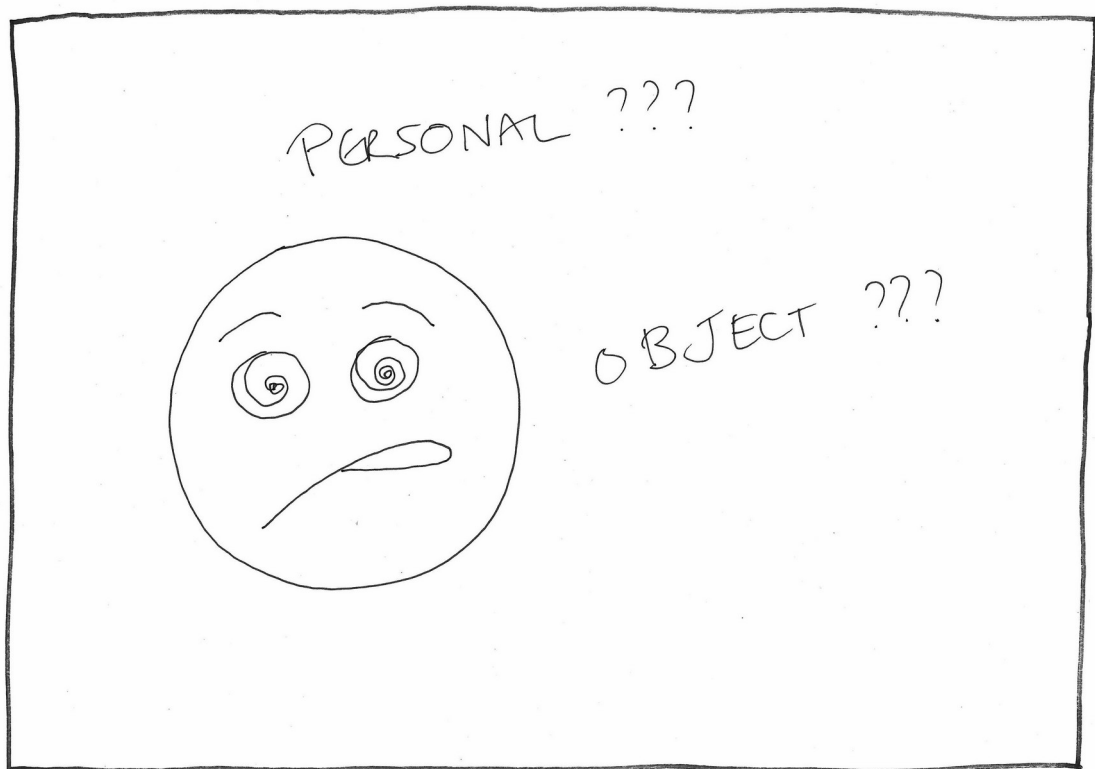
Is there such a thing as a personal object? What do these words even mean?

Even if we stick to jewellery:

When we research, talk, write about jewellery, we are always confronted with a shared (whether by us or by other groups) history:
- shared social, economic, religious, ideological, material, cultural (you name it!) norms;
- shared social, economic, religious, ideological, material, cultural (you name it!) purposes;
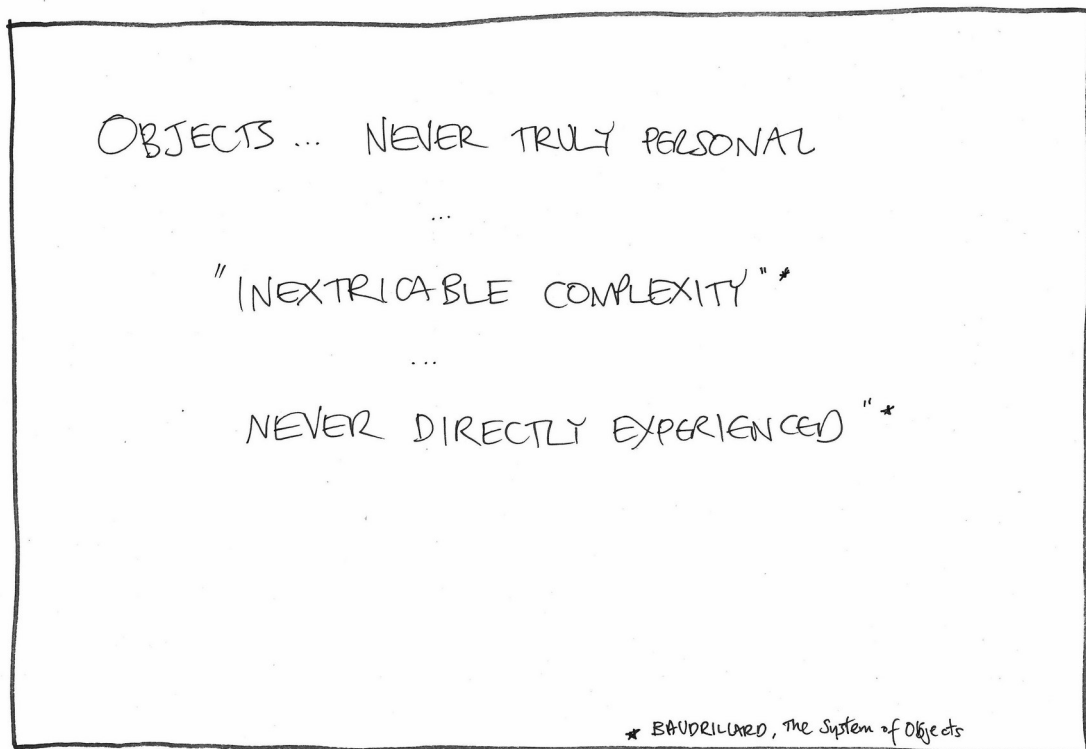When we learn to make jewellery, we rely on shared knowledge, some of which extremely ancient and some of which much more contemporary. A knowledge that is both material and technical, but also intrinsically linked to the shared histories I have just mentioned.

Reading the summary of the previous conference, and reading the research project outline for this one, I was glad that my first questions had already been addressed by the presenters two years ago. Jewellery is never personal as such as it is always liminally positioned for the maker, the wearer and the viewer. And it is positioned there also on the most liminal of our organs as so-called subjects, our skin – our border between the inside and the outside. Jewellery is therefore capable of a particular agency, intrinsic and / or activated by a shared history, norms, purposes etc., and mostly, but not always, by the body. And the body is always a body politic – which is also what I would like to concentrate more on.

And so I am not going to spend more time going over those already well-exposed arguments of the previous presenters, or talking much more about jewellery itself. What I would like to do instead is to try and continue to unpack as much as possible the powerful binomial that is "personal object": two apparently simple everyday words that sustain a whole worldview behind them.

When we talk about personal objects, jewellery, amulets, keepsakes, but also books, clothes, what are we actually saying?

For a start, objects are never completely "personal" because of their PROVENANCE: somebody extracted the materials from somewhere or something, somebody manufactured them, somebody marketed them, somebody sold them, somebody processed the payment for them, somebody delivered them to the shop or to the house. The list is quite vast. On top of that, most of the times there is a further *TRANS-ACTION* that surrounds so-called personal objects: at some point, they have been bought, exchanged, gifted, stolen. Even when they are found, somebody could have lost them or deposited them. Or, in case of objects we class as "natural", we are normally totally ignoring, in our own very special anthropocentric way, what Bruno Latour calls the 'ACTANT' aspect of the world around us: these natural objects have not magicked themselves there for our own use, but they are in fact the product of earth processes which, in the case of a simple pebble one might find on the beach, have taken millions of years of hidden labour to exist.

OBJECTS ... NEVER TRULY PERSONAL

...

"INEXTRICABLE COMPLEXITY" *

...

NEVER DIRECTLY EXPERIENCED" *

★ BAUDRILLARD, The System of Objects

Objects are never truly personal because they don't exist in a vacuum: they are part of a network, an INFRASTRUCTURE. So, objects possess, are part of, and function within, an INEXTRICABLE COMPLEXITY (structural – so technological, social, economic, for example – and also functional and cultural) that is, for the most, NEVER DIRECTLY EXPERIENCED.

And on this note, this word – "personal" – is actually much more concerned with OWNERSHIP than we originally think. Yes, we can have a location, for example, that is very personal to us, or words – for example from a book – that resonate in a very personal way for us. But when we combine the words personal and object, yes these are objects that <u>mean</u> something to us, but they are also always objects that <u>belong</u> to us. We cannot have a "personal" object that is also not physically ours.

"PERSONAL"

So what does this word "personal" actually mean?

What is the "personal"? Does it really exist?
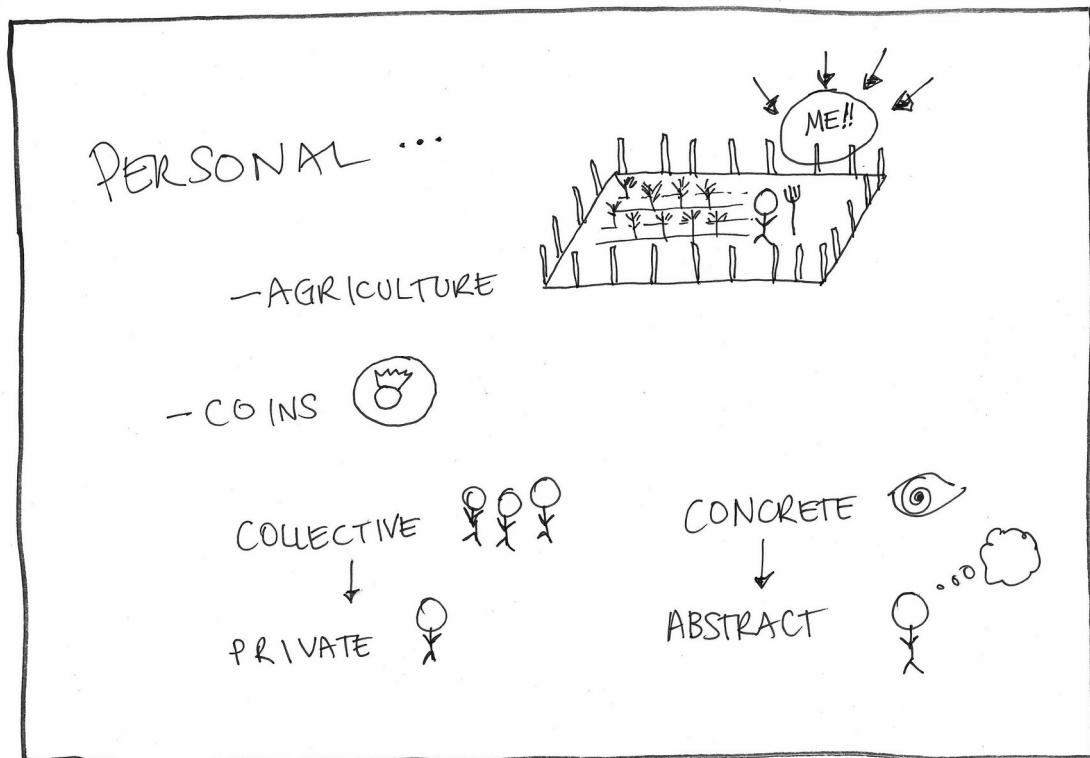
The idea of the personal is linked to the concept of the INDIVIDUAL. From a practical, social function point of view, this starts to appear with the rise of agriculture, and the shift from a system of collective shared responsibility for the tasks of gathering and hunting, to the need to divide land of often unequal quality, then store, guard and allocate food resources. This is where the concept of PRIVATE PROPERTY comes into existence. All this then gets reinforced with the arrival of coins. Coinage and monetisation bring a big shift into early Greek, but also Indian and Chinese, metaphysical thinking. On the one hand, equality is promoted through the use of a "shared" system with standardised values where people can carry out transactions on a supposedly equal footing.

However, of course:
- whose measured were used? There has to be a dominant faction to impose their own measures and standards!
- and who shared these transactions on supposedly equal footings? For example, so-called democracy was already non-existent as land distribution had already created massive imbalances in power, and even with the formation of the Greek polis, democracy was very far from inclusive!

But even more importantly, and this is parallel to developments in early metaphysical thought, there is of course a promotion of ABSTRACTION versus the real (so, to put it simply, the abstract becomes more real than the concrete). And then there is a promotion in particular of the

abstraction of the concept of VALUE itself (so for example the value attributed to a coin does not have to correspond to the actual value of the metal it contains). This abstraction goes hand in hand with the gradual disappearance of visible shared resources: so the public distribution of very visible and large collective resources, such as meat and other gathered produce, is slowly replaced by the distribution of small, hardly visible, abstract-based, resources.

This:
1 - gives power to a particular locality which already possesses the natural metallurgic resources to produce coinage;
2 - is a process that, once a locality has been chosen, has to be managed separately in each specific locality through the whole process of extraction, manufacture and distribution, giving rise to more power imbalances;
3 - and the resulting resources can now be hidden and exchanged out of sight. Not only! They can also be ACCUMULATED out of sight as a personal resource.

So already we can start seeing how the idea of the "personal" – such a simple everyday word, as we said – is in fact very problematic and links big socio-economic (and technological!) shifts with big philosophical ones.

After that, certainly in the Western world, culturally the final and total rise of the individual is the product first of the Renaissance and then of the Enlightenment, which brought about a lot more enslavement into the system than the freedoms they promised. Both the so called neolithic and scientific revolutions have in fact caused an imbalance of power first between entities newly recognised as individuals, and then between humankind and what is then philosophically named "nature", viewed as something external, opposed and alien. And so we have to try and remember that it is these NEW POWER STRUCTURES that lie behind the "emotional" veneer of the term "personal". And the idea of a "personal object" must be acknowledged as a hidden message of both the culture of private property and its associated power structures.
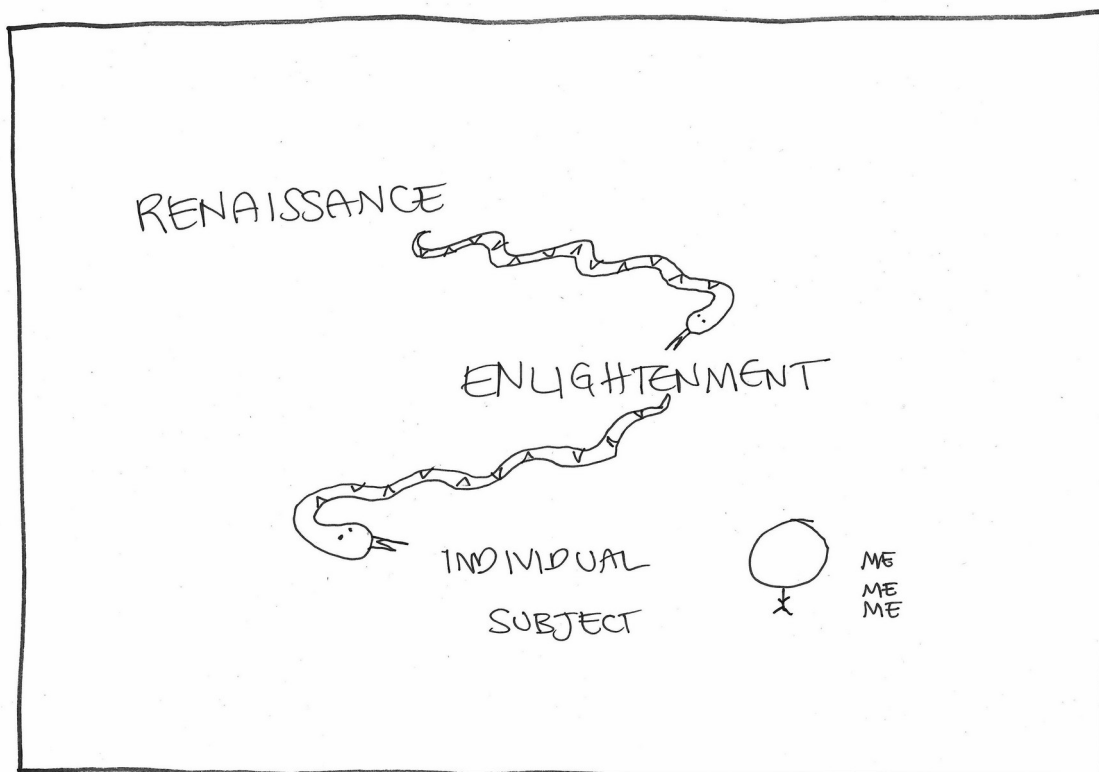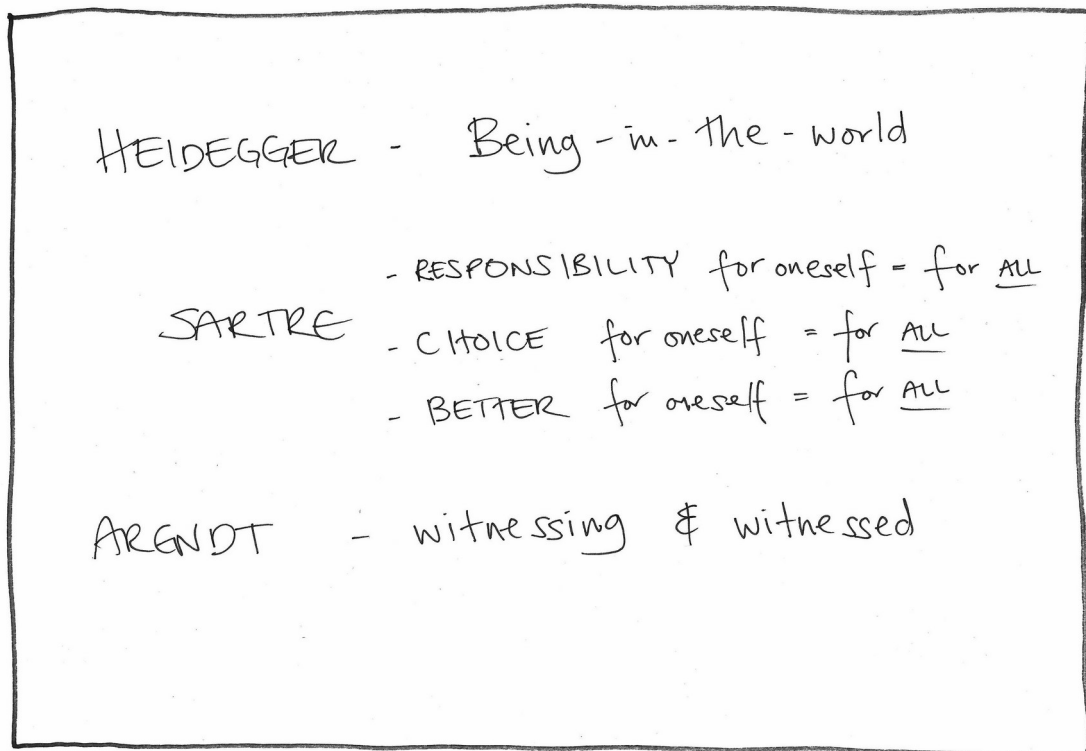
Which of course brings us to the "person" for whom the object is personal: the INDIVIDUAL, yes, but also the individual for whom an object can exist, i.e. the SUBJECT.

What is an individual? The word's etymology goes back to the Latin "*in-dividuus/m*", or indivisible. But indivisible from what? Or whom?

Individuals, just as objects, do not exist in a vacuum....

There is of course much that has been said about how we exist in the world, and Eastern thought has always been more advanced than Western in this sense. But we in the West started catching up, certainly in the 20th century and mostly as a result of horrendous socio-political and economic divisions and persecutions on one side, and of the anxieties of an hyper-accelerated world on the other. And slowly, over the decades, the Enlightenment sense of individualistic invincibility and dominance of the human/subject over the everything else/object begins to be questioned and to show its cracks.

HEIDEGGER - Being - in - the - world

SARTRE
- RESPONSIBILITY for oneself = for ALL
- CHOICE for oneself = for ALL
- BETTER for oneself = for ALL

ARENDT - witnessing & witnessed

Vertical thinking starts to make way for a more horizontal one, and critical thinking reveals the personal to be always political in its deepest sense, that is where we are but an element in a shared universe. Thinkers like Martin Heidegger talk of INTERDEPENDENCE and 'being-in-the-world', deeply influencing the development of the western environmental movement. Others, like Sartre, who had in the beginning focused his attention on the freedom and attached personal responsibility of each individual to make their CHOICES, comes to realise that that freedom does not exist unless it is shared, and that the RESPONSIBILITY is in fact to make choices that are not individually but COLLECTIVELY beneficial. This is of course exactly the thought that is picked up and developed by Hannah Arendt when she talks about individual action having collective social value not within and for our own individual sphere of existence, but only when it is public and accountable – that is when we can be witness and witnessed.

Phenomenology builds up from Husserl's more purely intellectual critical exercise of bracketing concepts to incorporate, with Merleau-Ponty, an analysis and a critique of how the BODY relates to objects and how objects in fact confer humanity to that body. Highlighting the political in the body and the space it occupies – and how it occupies it – Mearleau-Ponty talks of our relation to the objective world in terms of interdependence and reciprocity when it comes to defining oneself and the other. Basically, we are nothing without the world around us to make us such, and the world is nothing without our coming into contact with it.

> The relations between things or aspects of things having always our body as their vehicle, the whole of nature is the setting of our own life, or our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue.
> …
>
> The thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually *in itself* because its articulations are those of our very existence, and ... which invest[s] it with humanity.
> …
>
> To this extent, every perception is a communication or a communion...
>
> … any coming to awareness of the perceptual world was hampered by the prejudices arising from objective thinking... reduc[ing] all phenomena which bear witness to the union of subject and world... [to] the clear idea of the object as *in itself* and of the subject as pure consciousness.
>
> **Maurice Merleau-Ponty**, *Phenomenology of Perception*

We have already mentioned Bruno Latour and his important coining of the new term, 'actant', to allow for inclusivity and equality in how we perceive the hidden labour processes of the non-human – of all those we so often nonchalantly and also naïvely call objects. And Bruno Latour has also extensively written on the body politic. Taking Latour, but also many others, as a her springboard, Jane Bennet pushes the agenda to expand it from a pure political theory that has to do with modes of production and consumption. What she is interested in is not just to highlight our relationship with the non-human, but to point the way as to how relearning about and reframing the non-human can make us better humans, and humans that can pursue some concept of happiness as well as their survival.

But if there is optimism in the possibilities offered by the renunciation of hyper-individualistic practices, there is also harsh critique of how our hyper-idealisation and hyper-identification with the subject has backfired on the human race and the planet.

Heidegger, in his essay 'Age of the World Picture', denounces quite early how modernity, as the culmination of earlier SUPER-INDIVIDUALISTIC IDEOLOGIES, has not only perpetuated the power imbalance embedded in the dichotomy between subject and object, but has amplified exponentially so that humans have become themselves objectified by their own ideology to become measurable, quantifiable, marketable. In 'The Question Regarding Technology', he calls this 'standing reserve'. Everything and everyone is rei-fiable and everything and everyone is reified. Everything and everyone is basically a resource.

Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* has become a classic articulation of how humans have become victims of their own SYSTEMS OF DOMINANCE: believing they are the subject at the apex of the food chain in the capitalist system, in fact they are nothing but subjected to its strategies in very obvious but also very subtle ways.

HEIDEGGER — Everything is a RESOURCE

BAUDRILLARD — OBJECTS ?
We own them ?
Or do they own us ?

ALTHUSSER —

I WANT YOU FOR U.S. ARMY
NEAREST RECRUITING STATION

And it is Althusser that, especially for our purposes today, shines a light on the ambivalence of this term – SUBJECT – which of course means not just the Descartes' thinking conscious individual but also someone under the control or jurisdiction of someone or something else. Althusser plays on this linguistic ambivalence to explain how the strategies and ideologies the human race has created to dominate (one another and the world as a resource) in fact are the ones that end up dominating it and subjecting it by calling it to perform tasks through which the ideologies themselves can be perpetuated. Ideological systems and apparatuses of power, such as the state, religion, but also the cultural apparatus, call on us – or 'interpellate us' as it is translated from the French – through offering or assigning an identity which we are encouraged to accept consensually, as if we had chosen it ourselves. In all these systems, this interpellation is not so we can be the own individual subjects for which we had created the apparatus in the first place, but to be the subjects that most help the ideological system itself to survive.

After our little journey through the subject, let's go back to the object. When we associate art with objects, we objectify our thinking and we objectify ourselves to a system that calls us subjects but to which we are in fact totally subjected, where we are called to perform a task as part of the system.

SO WHAT ARE SOME OF THESE TASKS THAT WE ARE BEING CALLED TO PERFORM?

WHAT ARE THESE IDENTITIES THAT WE ARE BEING SOLD AS IF THEY WERE THE NATURAL CHOICE?

AND WHY DO WE ACCEPT THEM WITHOUT CHALLENGE?

THE "OPEN CALL"

As a first example, let's look at the open call. Once again, these words need unpacking. A bit like when we are sold the "cloud" as a form of digital storage. This very clever fluffy word, which presents the idea of something clean and immaterial, in fact hides the reality of enormous and polluting storage servers, built with a huge amount of rare earth minerals and using humongous amounts of energy. There is always so much hidden power in a word.

So, the word "open" gives the impression that access is equal: that all people and all practices would be included. But are they? Apart from the obvious restrictions that are often imposed, for example age, they most often require the work to be of a certain type and presented in a certain way (we will talk about the collection later), or to be of a certain size. And once we have passed down these various first sieves, this word "open", which we keep using without really getting to the bottom of what it really means and what it should mean, also does not take into account things like geographical location and socio-economic, as well as cultural situations.

Just to use a couple of small examples, is access truly open to any-body on a very basic level, to know English as a foreign language enough to communicate with international organisers? And how difficult is it to undertake that type of communication on a cultural level, in terms of personal interaction and also in terms of groups which are already excluded from certain activities in their own situation? Or to write statements? Or to create and send professional images of their work? And don't tell me that anybody can take good photos with their phones these days, because
1 - that is not true when those photos are judged;
2 - it still requires skill; and
3 - most of all it still requires access to a smart phone and some sort of internet connection.

What groups does this exclude? And, most of all, what kind of DIVERSE, NON-CONFORMING ARTISTIC PRACTICES does it exclude? How limited, really, is that pool of people that end up taking part in any particular open call? So why use this word "open"? Just because it has always been there?

And then to the word "call". This is exactly what I was referring to a few minutes ago when talking about Althusser. The "call" is there to "call" upon us to fit into certain criteria, so that our work maybe can be seen and marketed. Most times artists have to pay for the privilege too. And this very often happens because the organisers themselves are part of exactly the same system in which, in order for their own projects to be seen, this is the easiest way to do it.

Calling out or being called seems like such a simple harmless thing. But what we are all being called is NOT TO BE but TO PERFORM as artists. And that performance has not only certain physical requirements, such as professional photos, but also requires that we market ourselves in the right way, that we all know how to write statements, that we are familiar with the procedures of an open call, and I could go on. What it does, it calls artists to perform the ACCEPTED ROLE of the PROFESSIONAL ARTIST. But accepted by whom? And what apparatus or system made up the rulebook
1 - that there should be such a thing as the professional artist, and
2 - of what a professional artist should be like?
For those who are inclined to read it, there is a wonderful very famous passage in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* where he describes a café waiter not just being a waiter but living his working life performing the role of what a really good professional waiter should be like.

Now, let's be careful here. I am not accusing anybody of doing this maliciously. But what we are doing is doing it UN-CRITICALLY.

Now that we've looked at the words themselves, let's think about the practice itself.

What the open call does is in fact OBJECTIFY the thinking of the artist by confining it to a set of criteria, but also objectifies the artist by reducing their quality to a measurable qualifiable quantity. What does this result in?

– The nuances of the hidden labour of thinking, researching and questioning, are by-passed in favour of a visible physical result, which is the ONLY measure used for selection.

– Statements, in themselves problematic at some level in terms of who can write them and in what language, might help counteract this problem. However, so very often they are limited to a very short word count. Or shunned in favour of the idea that the object should speak for itself. Imagine the contradiction that is being sold, often without even realising it: the object, this thing that on the one hand is judged as sheer product, having the grand ability to speak for itself!

– Instead this is because often judges don't have time to read all the material, and have to look through works quickly, very often because their own thinking labour is not considered in the equation.

– The open call also thrives on the patriarchal and capitalist principles of COMPETITION. As such, it lives not on collaborative practices but on the gain of the individual

> – first by promoting a highly opportunistic approach, based on personal gain and often on secrecy rather than, say, shared open-source knowledge;
>
> – and second, it preys on the creation of arbitrary hierarchies and the ultimate division between SELECTED and not-selected (in itself a word that recalls how Darwinian terminology has so often been co-opted in the justification of removal of rights).

On top of that, I have recently had an argument with a very well-known gallery*[1] hosting a very well-known contemporary jewellery open-call competition for reducing the artist's price for the purposes of insurance only to the cost of materials. This betrays a thinking of artistic process

1 - not only just in terms of a finished product, an OBJECT, but also

2 - something that is completely alienated from the mental and physical labour that produced it.

These are practices that, once again, cancel out hidden labour and knowledge that does not manifest into a quantifiable item. This is bad enough in contemporary jewellery, where often the cost of materials is non-existent. But imagine the same gallery asking Tracey Emin to list her insurable artist's price as the cost of a stick of charcoal and a scrap of paper. Or of her used bed covers. But also, in a much more sinister way, imagine how a woman's hidden caring labour so often goes unaccounted for. Or how shared indigenous knowledge is constantly by-passed because it is often not written (and therefore marketable) or, even worse, it is stolen and THEN written and patented so that it does become marketable.

A couple of years ago I was asked to start being a judge on an open-call global design graduate competition. At first, being such an interdisciplinary contest, from a company that over the years has continuously demonstrated care and interest towards, and strongly encouraged the practice of art and design, and also as the competition has such an open and varied panel of judges from all backgrounds, I agreed as I thought it could provide constructive feedback for the participants. But the feedback is not passed on, for many reasons, including companies being scared of their comments being public, and everything is reduced to classificatory numbers without the possibility for nuanced considerations.

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1   This, by the way, is the Gallery of Art in Legnica, organising the yearly major competition as part of the Silver festival. The call has just come out last week (28 September 2022) and again the form has not been changed. I intend to now denounce this practice publicly.

The awards and selections, common to so many areas of the art world, fill the CVs of practitioners – including mine and I am sure yours – perpetuating a model that:

1 - reinforces the position of art as a product;

2 - reinforces the idea that the practising of art is something that can be measured, quantified and marketed; therefore

3 - also reducing the artist to a product that can then be marketed and sold.

And all of this is very often sold to artists under the guise of PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT and learning to make a living out of their work. Because their thinking alone could never be quantified and therefore it could never qualify them as productive members of society.

THE "COLLECTION"

As we're looking at language and competition, let's think about the words "collection" and "innovation", which are staples of judgement criteria. Both of these words are so deeply rooted in a culture of both CAPITALISM and ACCELERATION. The word "collection" is particularly dangerous in the fields of fashion, textiles, design and anything portable. This word, used so ubiquitously, and so often adopted without critically assessing it, again, reduces practice to:

- products that all fit together in the same criteria;

- (also, it reduces practice to) the idea that FINITE products that produce CONCLUSIVE answers are better because they are more cohesive, and, as a result, that what is not cohesive, conclusive and questioning is not of much value. This is also something I have already tried to highlight in another piece of writing for the Joya Barcelona jewellery art fair catalogue (which you can find on my website).

Furthermore, in the context of a competition, who is the gatekeeper for those criteria? Who decides what makes a collection and what doesn't? What is cohesive and what isn't? And on what basis?

> … the everyday passion for private property is often stronger than all the others, and sometimes even reigns supreme...
>
> It is a measured, diffuse, regulating passion whose fundamental role in the vital equilibrium of the subject or the group – in the very decision to live – we tend not to gauge very well.
>
> **Jean Baudrillard**, The System *of Objects*

The word "collection" promotes the ideology that
- we should aim for something to be always conclusive, and once something is done we should move on to the next one, and that the next one should be better than the finished one;
- and the ideology that finite equals exclusive, and therefore more marketable because more covetable;
- and what is covetable fuels the need for possession, for PRIVATE possession, and in so doing it makes us even more of a subject, alienated from our collective in order to compete with other individuals.

And as we're on the subject, let's remember that, after all, the word "EXCLUSIVE" means what it means not because something has intrinsic value but because it "excludes" the many from the right to access it.

"INNOVATION"
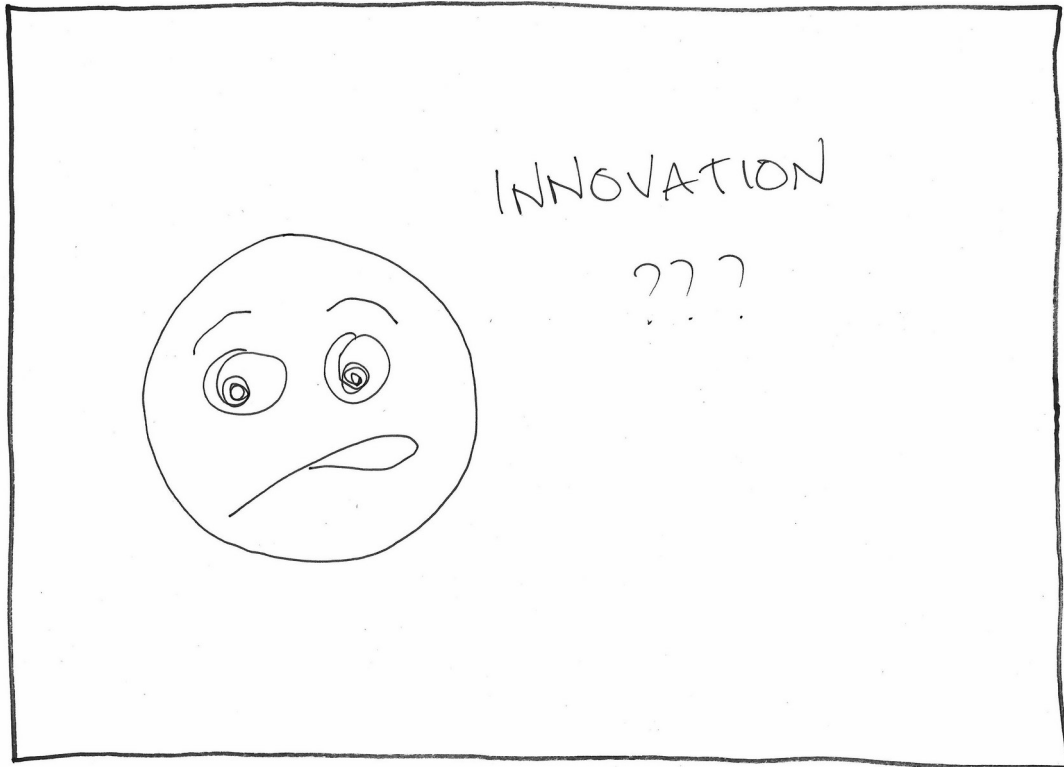
Let's now look at another ubiquitous word: "innovation". This word is rooted in a TECHNO-CENTRIC vision of the world. What this means is that technology (in any form, not just the contemporary electronic stuff) is seen as the basis on which to measure progress. What this also means is that everything is measured and quantified according to an INSTRUMENTAL RATIONALITY: basically, how useful it is. And usefulness is based, according to this ideology, mostly on its economic impact.

But again, useful to whom? Economic impact for whom?

Martin Heidegger, again in 'Age of The World Picture', finds the roots of this thinking in what is, once again, generally considered a great revolution for the Western worldview: that of Socratic thought. He traces how, with Socrates, beings are not apprehended just for what they are but they start being subjected to an analysis of their composition. This is also the beginning of modern science, of the experiment, and finally with the so-called revolution that we have mentioned before, of being named, categorised and put into anthropocentric taxonomical classifications. "Man" (because it is always man, and not woman) becomes the subject and the measure of everything else. Everything else is measured according to how useful or different it is to man. But even among men, <u>which</u> men? This kind of anthropocentric and techno-centric world, in fact, in the end subjects even humans to the same classifications they have created. They themselves are objectified, measured and classified.

These words – "collection" and "innovation" are solidly bound to an ideology that links the passing of TIME with PROGRESS and GROWTH. Also, they imply that new always equals progress, and that progress is always equal to growth, and that growth is always equal to progress. Crucially, they also imply that something that is not fully formed or totally new (as if that was at all possible) is also in a primitive state which needs development. These, just in case we need reminding, are exactly the same ideologies driving, and justifying, for example, the continued practice of colonial exploitation.

"DIGITAL PRESENCE"
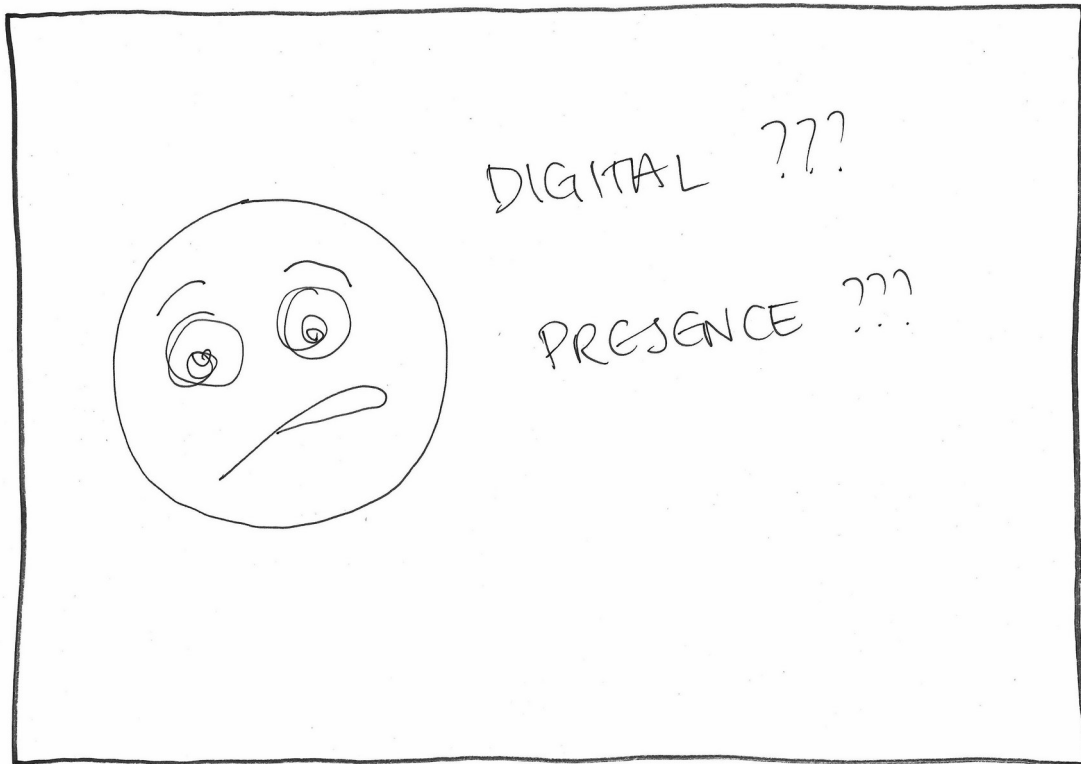
The same goes for our "digital presence". It is marketed to us as the ticket to explore and celebrate our individuality, but in fact the more we buy into it, the more we belong to the mass of users, victims and perpetrators of perennial and inattentive scrolling. Also, the more we buy into it, the more we become willing exploited resources of data to be mined through digital extraction technologies, like algorithms. The problem is that being part of a mass should normally be very empowering. However, this is a mass that is not collective but a sum of what are still individuals and alienated from each other. Most importantly, it is exactly our "presence" which is taken away from us: the bodily presence that makes us – to go back to Hanna Arendt – witness and witnessed; the bodily presence that takes up shared space instead of the abstract presence in a completely privatised space in which we feel united and yet remain completely fragmented, always willing victims of someone else's game of divide and conquer.

In fact, all these examples demonstrate how the practice of art has so easily fallen prey to MARKET STRATEGIES, selling back to the artist the idea of a creative industry or an art market, making the artist
1 - believe on one hand in the exclusivity of their thinking; then
2 - on the other hand, making them strive to be a productive and employable member of society; and finally
3 - setting them up to be mostly failed by the very system it has created for the artist to operate in by being :
      a - ALIENATING (of the artist towards other artist but also of the artist towards the manifestation of their thinking);
      b - DIVISIVE (promoting competition instead of co-operation between individuals, but also between disciplines, promoting a discourse that encourages hierarchisation);
   c - OBJECTIFYING (reducing both art practice and the artist themselves to an object, with all the connotations we have explored here today).

And, by the way, again just in case we need reminding, these are also the same strategies operated by populist and fascist politics in the age of completely deregulated capitalism.

CONCLUSIONS

And so, in this meandering of ours today, let's go back to the personal object.

If these apparently simple and innocuous words, "personal" and "object", by themselves but even more powerfully so when combined, actually perpetuate a way of looking at the world that is individualistic, competitive, divisive and anthropocentric, where does this leave us? How can we even think about ascribing a social value to something that is so defined without taking a step back to deconstruct and reconsider what these words actually mean?
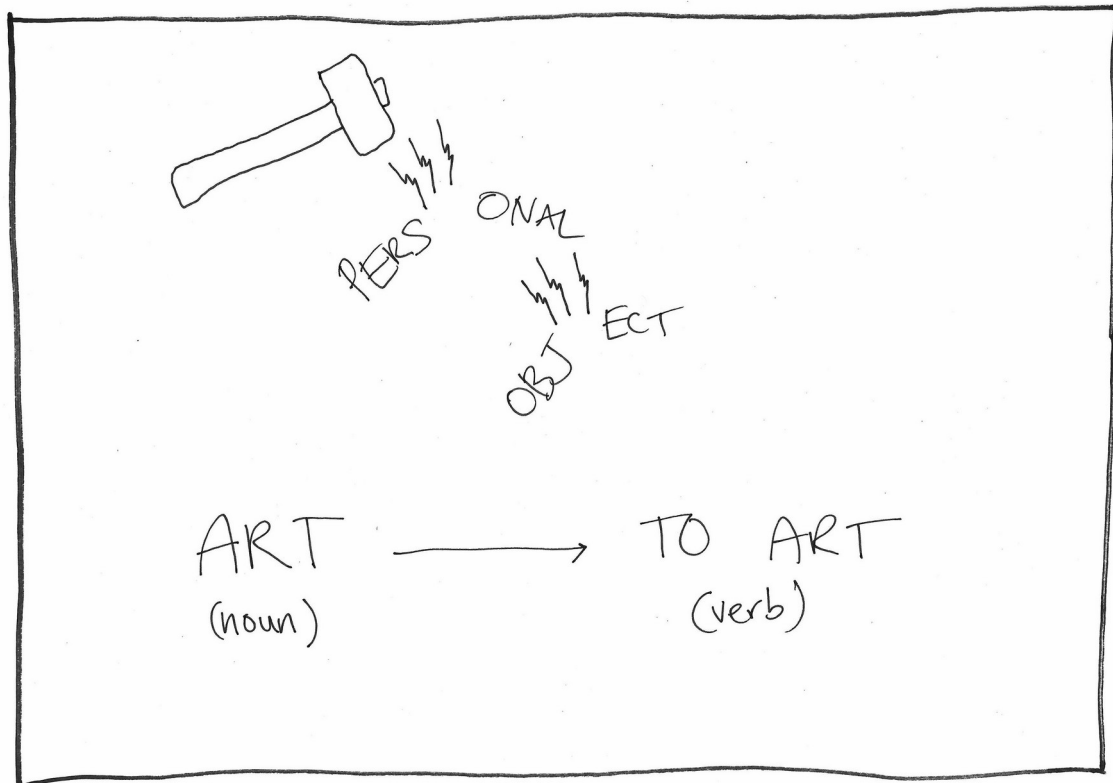
Where does this leave us as artists in our thinking and our doing? How can we promote social value without succumbing to the submission to a subject-object dichotomy? How can we promote a collectivity that is based on shared responsibility and practices that take into accounts all of our voices, and those of others, from the inside? Can we collectively relearn "*to art*" as a verb, and how, can we relearn to talk about how this "arting" manifests itself?

One practical way I have started to adopt – in my own way, and as have others – is not to confine my thinking by means of the specialisms of closed disciplines and instead visualise mine as a holistic practice where life itself is studio and study time, where there is no hierarchy of activities, nor any hierarchy in the manifestations of that thinking, be it writing, a piece of jewellery, a lecture, a workshop, a mentoring session. In the same way I am trying to eliminate the thought of those manifestations, especially the more physical ones like a paper or a piece of jewellery, as objects. And more and more I am questioning what it means, if anything, to be a subject.

Another path I am rejecting (or being extremely critical in my approach) is being a subject that is summoned to the open call, and instead focus on my own or collaborative projects which, whether I am the initiator or not, are guided by more collective participatory principles – again, as have others, and I believe from the programme we are going to hear more about some of these projects later. This is proving to be, as sociologist Hartmut Rosa calls it, a more 'resonant' practice: it wishes to be DYNAMIC, ADAPTIVE, EXPLORATORY and COLLABORATIVE, asking QUESTIONS of oneself and/or of the participants, of the artists as well as of the manifestations of their thinking, whatever that might be. The success of such projects, whether done on one's own or as part of a group, is also <u>not</u> measurable or quantifiable in any of our value-added terms: sales, numbers of visitors, clicks and likes on social media. Such projects are established as a (shared if in a group) questioning tool – on a creative level as much as a social one – and it is as such that they should be valued and critiqued.
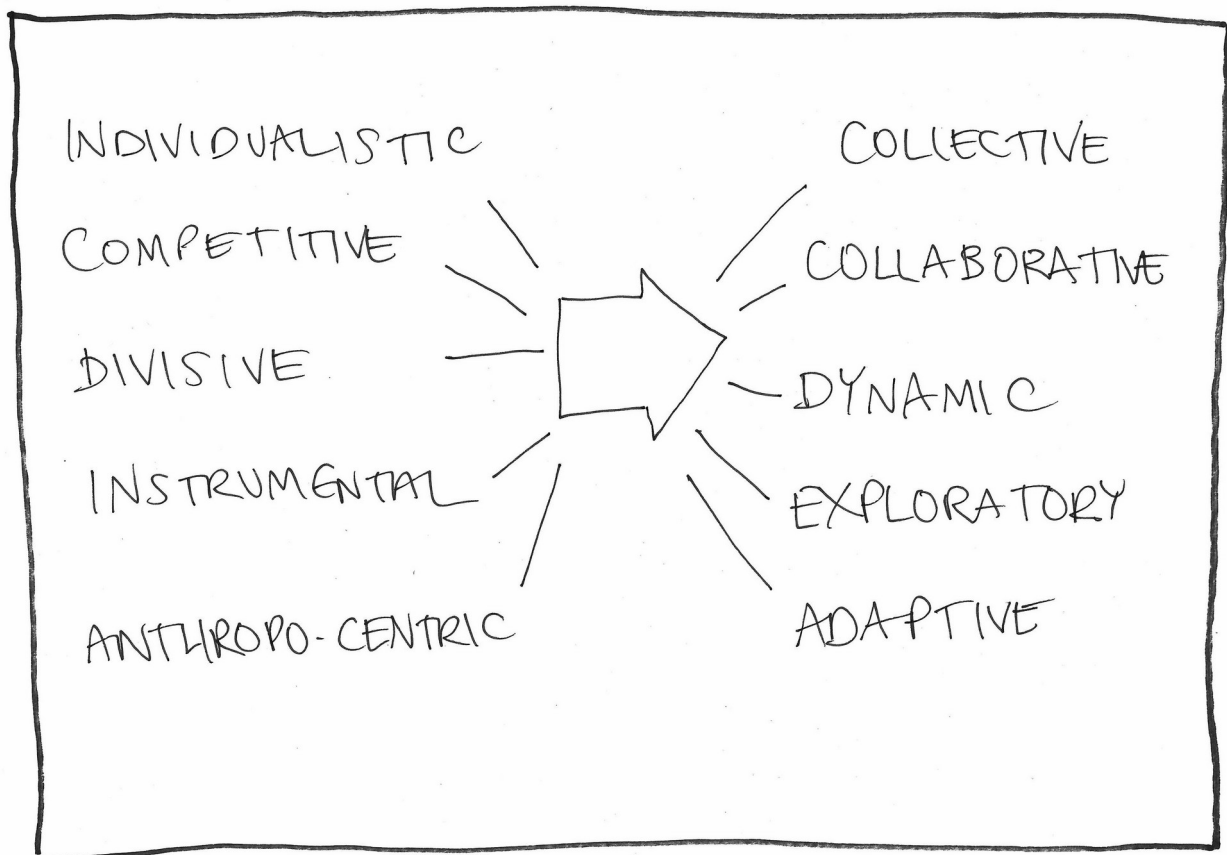
In the same way, I have stopped collaborations that, while they had started on the basis of equal exchange, have subsequently become exploitative by tilting the power balance in their favour. For example, I have refused to further publish content on a well-known platform*² after I discovered that my writing, a deeply integral part of my art practice, which I had exchanged freely in an equal barter, was being completely objectified and was being moved behind their paywall after six months, monetised and marketed. It had in fact been made even more exclusive, and only accessible to subscribers.

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2   This, by the way, is Klimt02. I offered content and they offered the platform in an equal barter. After six months, <u>without agreeing this in advance</u>, my content was not public any longer but only available to subscribers.

On a much more positive note, I convinced the editor of another major platform*[3] why I could not – and in fact why nobody should – subject my writing to the widespread practice of putting text through a readability scale. For those who don't know what that is, your writing gets put through publishing software which decides whether your sentences are too difficult to read. (According to whom? Again, who are the gatekeepers of these rules?) The software then decides where sentences and paragraphs are too long, and whether the grammar and syntax are simple enough – a typical anglophone problem, by the way, as if we needed more ways to create imperialistic cultural exploitation! (By the way, Wordpress and Microsoft also operate this software as standard.) This not only reduces writing to an arbitrary number. It also objectifies the work of both writers and editors, depriving them of the nuances and diversity of their work and interventions. It also objectifies the readers by feeding them uniformly written content, much deprived of style and rhythm, forcing them to become less and less critical instead of empowering them.

What does it mean to be
a SUBJECT

if that OBJECTIFIES us,
others, and the world
we live in ?

What we can and are willing to do is up to us and how prepared we are for the task – keeping in mind that our choices, <u>always and inevitably</u>, have a bearing not just on us but on the rest of our artistic community and the world at large. Calling out objectifying practices is for the BENEFIT OF EVERYBODY, and it requires of all of us to REFRAME what it is to be a subject. But let's remember that if we continue to collectively fall for the trappings of the system, and to be called and accept the identity that the system wants us to perform, we ourselves are nothing but that system.

I'm of course not advocating not making or a complete abstraction of art practice. In fact, quite the opposite. I am advocating *thinking as praxis*, as a *doing* practice that might, however, manifest itself in many many ways, none of which cannot and should not be called or reduced to "objects". What I am advocating is a shifting in perspective, starting from the language that we use to describe what we do and how we do it. In the specific field that is being discussed here today especially, how good – or useful! – is it to define jewellery as a "personal object" when we ascribe

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3   This is Art Jewelry Forum. It is important that we become aware of these practices and that we speak up and <u>critically</u> argue our position with our co-working team if we feel they diminish our artistic practice.

to it such powerful agency and relationality? And what does it mean to be a jewell-er in a worldview where this is considered a subject that makes objects out of other objects?

> And if our techno- and anthropo-centric worldviews are
> so divisive, destructive, and despotic,
> what alternative worldviews – that are not only possible but
> used by societies and cultures our worldview simply cancels
> out – can we look across at and re-learn to adopt? Not in a
> nostalgic way for simpler times gone by, which would only hide
> a sense of imperialist superiority, but as
> complex, actively inclusive and connective restorative policies
> for our very contemporary times?
>
> **Lieta Marziali**, *from this lecture*

And if our techno- and anthropo-centric worldviews are so divisive, destructive, and despotic, what alternative worldviews – that are not only possible but used by societies and cultures our worldview simply cancels out – [what other worldviews] can we look across at and re-learn to adopt? Not in a nostalgic way for simpler times gone by, which would only hide a sense of imperialist superiority, but as complex, actively inclusive and connective restorative policies for our very contemporary times?

And can we, and if so how, create or recreate a common language that is both expressive and promoter of truly INCLUSIVE COLLECTIVE THINKING rather than of a social that is centred on object-based individualism?

And what language should express this worldview? Here we are using English, a language that is common to us but also alien. For me, English is a marker of identity as a long-term immigrant to the UK. However, I find it both liberating and terrifying that I could not have written this lecture in Italian. What does that say about me? but also what does it hide?

And yet the word for art is the same in Italian and in English, and it originates from the Latin *ars*, suggesting that I am in fact using words that come from a more familiar worldview than I think. But actually one of the most interesting and beautiful realisations, a long time ago in my research into etymons, was that the word "art" originates from the much bigger linguistic pool that is so-called Indo-European – (and of course this will in itself reflect only a certain, albeit much much wider and shared one, worldview) – in which the prefix "ar" means "to fit together".

To fit together... to MAKE MEANING where there was none before.

ART ≠ OBJECT

ART = COLLECTIVE QUESTIONING
↓
ONGOING SHARED PROCESS
OF
MEANING - MAKING
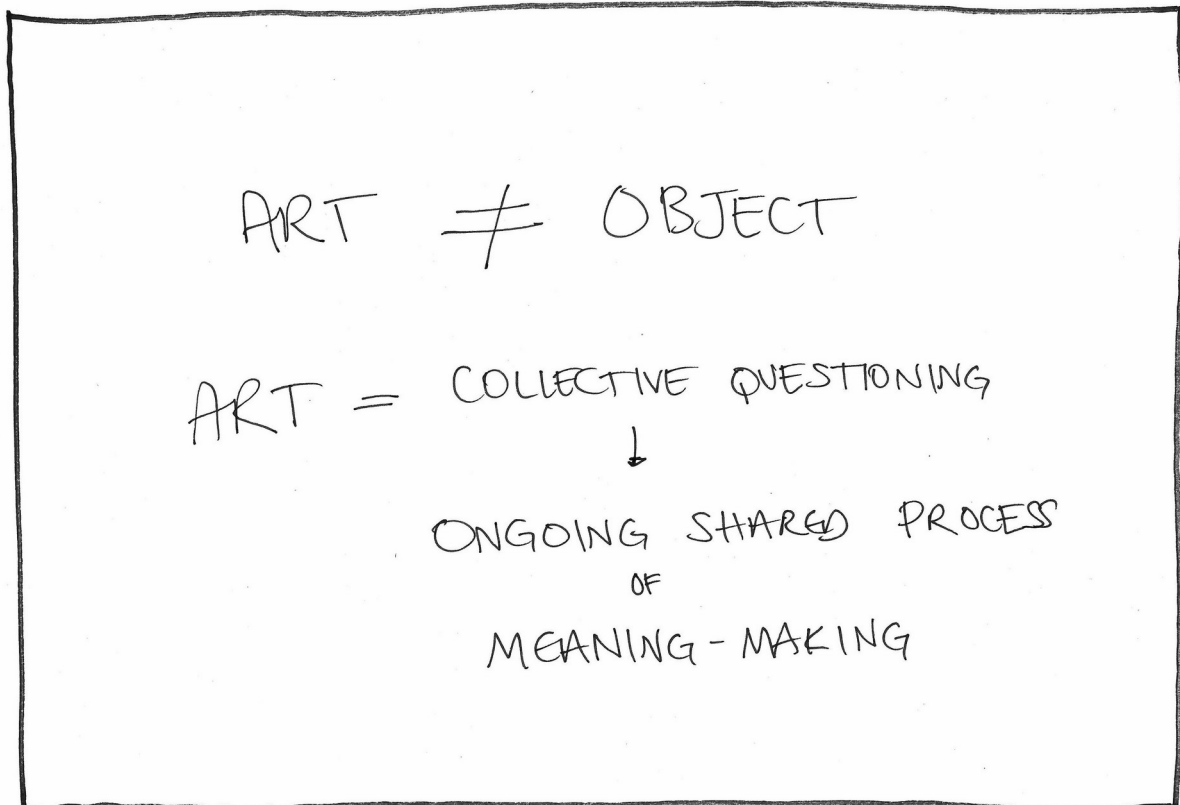
Heidegger places the work of art in a liminal space – what he calls the 'strife', between 'world' and 'earth', between meaning and material. It is in this space that meaning begins for a people of a time, and also, crucially, where it starts to be experienced, shared, questioned, preserved and made historical, only to go through the whole thing again and again through different peoples in different times. In this liminal space, the work of art is not an object but an ONGOING AND SHARED PROCESS OF MEANING-MAKING.

This was the very very ancient role of myth, shared by all groups to collectively and collaboratively question and create meaning within the world around them. My vision of art is also one of myth-making, of a COLLECTIVE QUESTIONING that is truly social because witnessing and witnessed, and also constantly re-examined and questioned historically not by but towards or within the process of formation of social values.

And so I do not have answers to all of this, but I am also learning to understand that the practice of art in its thinking and its doing is not to have answers. It is to open up new questions, which we can manifest in many and various ways. And then it is to question those questions, change them, refine them. Because our questions must not become our new answers.

And for this we need a NEW LANGUAGE that does not carry the burdens of a metaphysics that we need to surpass if we want to learn – or in fact RE-learn – to live not as alienated and dominant of both each other and our cosmos, but as COLLECTIVELY RESONANT elements within it.

Thank you.

NOTE ON THE TEXT / REFERENCING

This lecture was delivered in a slightly shorter, more *ad lib*, version live during the Šperk Stret conference on 22 September 2022. The text was subsequently made available by myself to attendees either privately or via the Šperk Stret organisers, and it is this text that I wish to be used for referencing purposes.

A QUICK POST-SCRIPTUM ON SUGGESTED READING
As I am becoming accustomed for lectures, I don't want to impose a bibliography as such. Instead, in the spirit of more inclusive and collaborative practices, I want to share an offering of suggested readings, of primary literature only, that would hopefully open up for any of you who would like to explore them, more questions and conversations. For the texts with just a year, that would be their original year of publication, and they are all freely available online. For the others, I have included full bibliographical information. Go and be curious.

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