

A LEAP INTO NOTHINGNESS, AND THE FREEDOM OF POSSIBILITY: ART AS THINKING PRAXIS



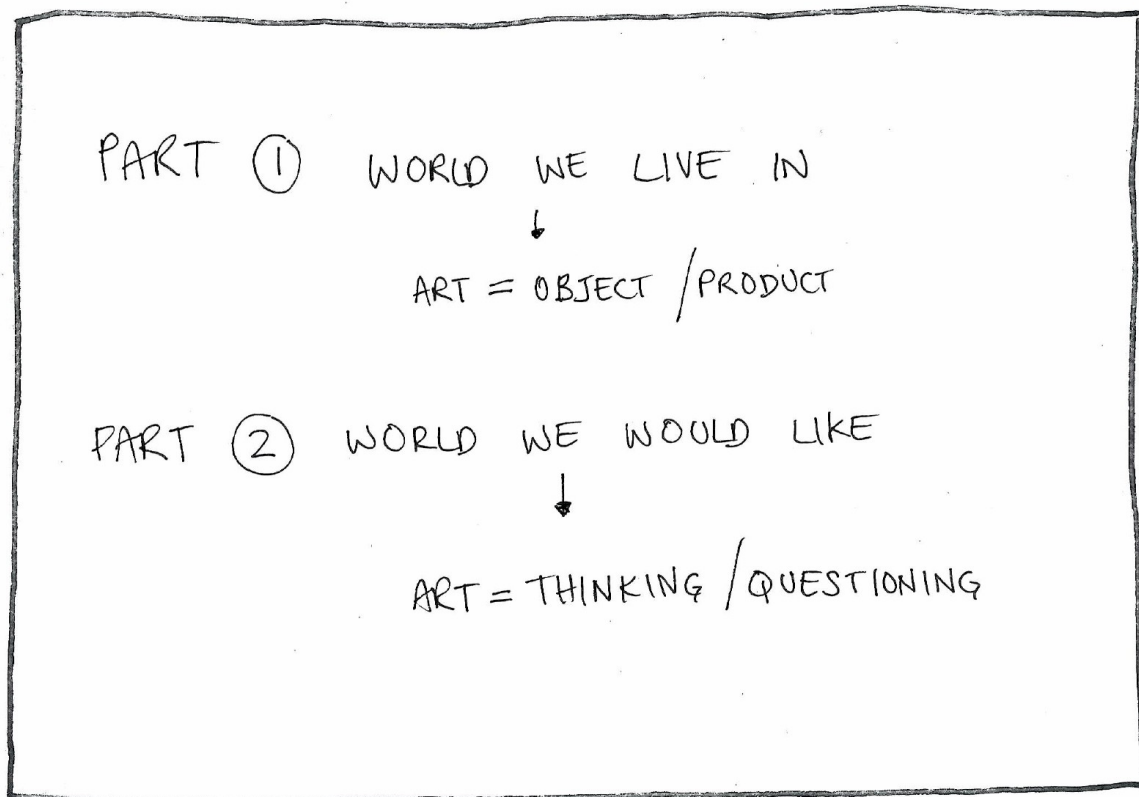
**A LEAP INTO NOTHINGNESS, AND THE FREEDOM OF POSSIBILITY:
ART AS THINKING PRAXIS**

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you very much for inviting me to give a lecture here today. It is so important to be able to come together to share research and thinking.



So, this lecture is going to be divided in two parts. The first part is focused on the state we find ourselves in – in the world and in the art world. The second part is concerned with what art – what artists – can do to change this kind of world, which was the central theme of my catalogue essay for the Cosmos exhibition. It's going to be a bit of a long journey, but I hope that you will follow me through it and that, at the end, you can take some inspiration from it. Also, I understand that following a long lecture in English is not always easy, so in my slides I have done what I always did as a student: I made notes! And if you want to leave your email, we can let you have the transcript afterwards.

So, for me personally, in this past couple of years, especially through the Cosmos project, I have been doing a lot of research and have come to a point of profound reassessment of my work and my practice. More and more I am considering the role of what I make – the “objects” in my practice – and the role of myself as a subject, and what it means to be an artist and to practise art.

During this research, as a person I have been questioning what it means to live in a toxic anthropocentric world. Toxic anthropocentrism is the product of a patriarchal capitalist system, which, for millennia, has proven to be cataclysmically damaging, not only to all that it wanted to dominate, but also to the very species that it wanted to elevate – humans.

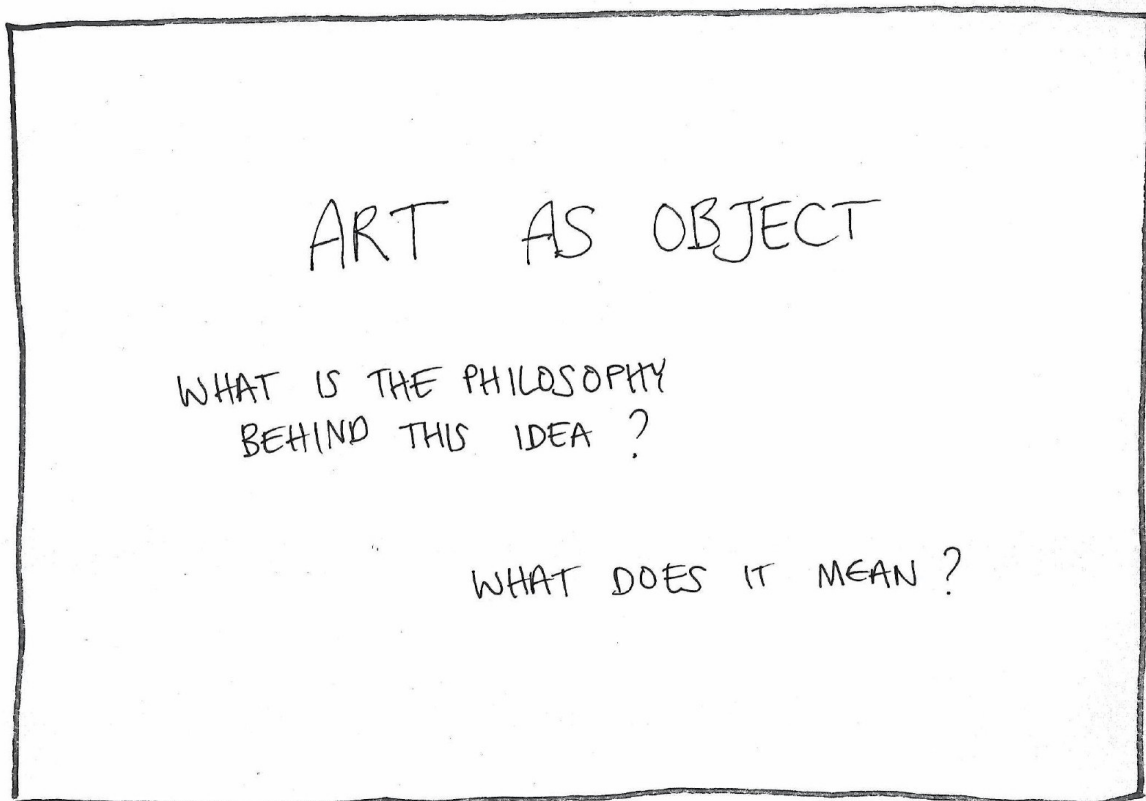
As an artist, I have also been giving a lot of thought to the problems of the concept of art as a *noun*, as an *object*, as something that needs to be visible, tangible, and that can be valued as a material thing. This is a concept of art as *product*, and of artist as producer. As object, art is *made*,

and the artist is the maker, or someone who controls matter. It is of course a perception of art that, while it still thinks of the artist as something genial or special, fits immensely well in this accelerated patriarchal capitalist world in which we continue to live.

In my essay for the Cosmos catalogue, I tried to ask myself what the role of art and artists is in this kind of world. My argument in the essay, and it will be my argument here, 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 – all that sits on the borders. I argue that the purpose is not to solve the puzzle, but to understand that, like the challenges we face, the puzzle is never-ending.

And so what I would like to do today is to present in this lecture this *other* kind of “art”. I would like to take you away at least a little from the discourse around jewellery, where more and more we are trying to analyse, categorise, and find conclusive definitions – what is goldsmithing, what is art jewellery, what is classical, what is contemporary, what is unique, what is production, and so on... Instead I would like you to embark with me on a journey – and this journey will perhaps be long and not always easy – and in this journey we will be able to ask ourselves some 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 an object, not a product*.

ART AS AN OBJECT – WHAT IS THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THIS? AND WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

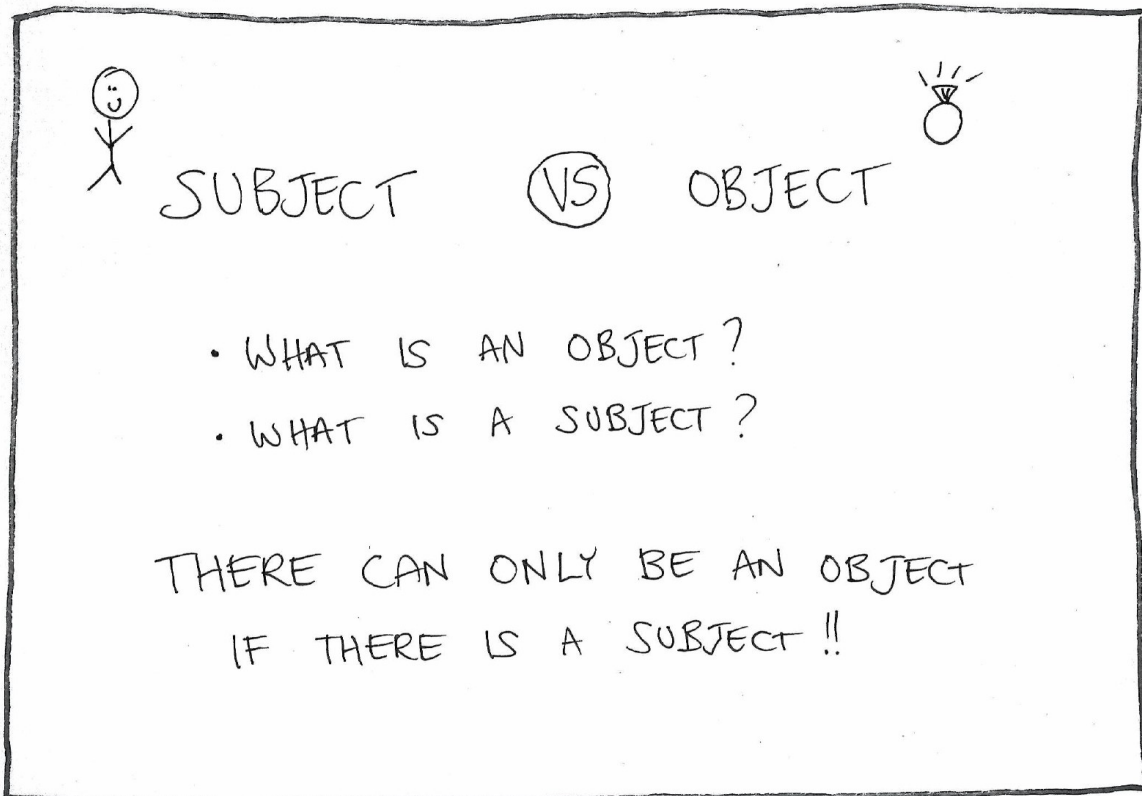


In my own practice, I questioned from very early on what it meant to have available, to access, to appropriate and to intervene on materials, which are, of course, also considered objects. At the beginning, my concerns were mostly of an environmental nature:

- What resources am I using? And what resources should 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 to more self-reflective, ontological ones – about the very nature of our existence:

- Who am I that I am able to use these resources? And what grants me the ability, and the right, to use them?



Mostly, however, I was just concerned with how to be a jeweller, and for many years I did not fully understand that this very goal of being a jeweller – and all the questions I just mentioned! – were in fact deeply rooted in the very concept or definition of *object*. Not only! They were rooted in the dichotomy – the division – (and of course also the hierarchy! – who or what is more important) 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 the field of jewellery, where the so-called “objects” themselves, the jewellery, are described as having such strong agency, such strong power.

The fact that we can think of something as an object goes hand in hand with the idea that we can think of ourselves – human beings – as an *individual*. And, more specifically, an individual for whom an object can exist: a subject.

But where does this idea come from?



(ph. THOR, Wikimedia Commons) - cropped



(ph. Virginia State Parks, Wikimedia Commons)



(ph. Rodrigo Paredes, Wikimedia Commons)



(ph. Steve Evans, Wikimedia Commons)

For example, let's just stick to jewellery for a moment:

When we research, talk, write about jewellery, we are always confronted with a shared history (whether that history is shared by us or by other groups):

- shared social, economic, religious, ideological, material, cultural *norms*, but also cultural *purposes* – you know, shared ways *in which we do* things and shared ways for *why* we do them.

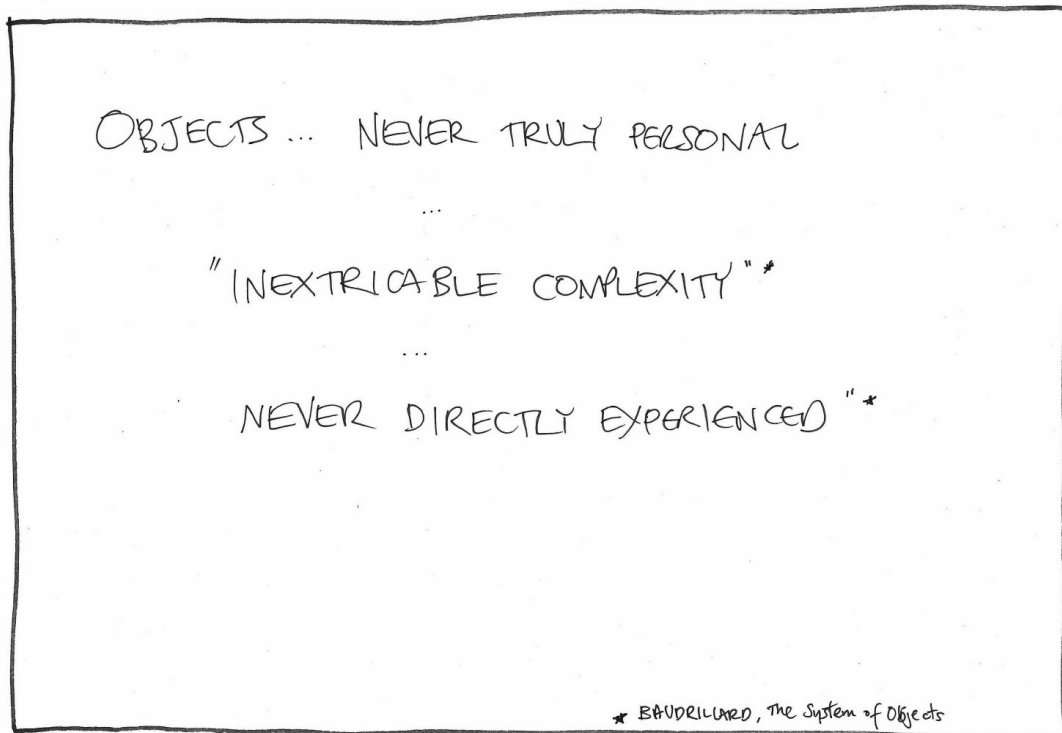
Wherever we are, whatever group of people we belong to, when we learn to make jewellery we rely on shared knowledge, some of which extremely ancient and some of which much more contemporary. A knowledge that is both material and technical, but also intrinsically linked to the shared histories I have just mentioned. So how can we think of jewellery (but any kind of artistic endeavour, really) as an object when we can't really ever separate it from who we are and why we do things in a certain way?



To give you another example, jewellery is also often described as a “*personal object*”. But objects are never completely “personal” because of their *provenance*: somebody extracted the materials from somewhere or something, somebody else manufactured them, somebody else marketed them, somebody else sold them, somebody else processed the credit card payment for them, somebody else 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 that we class as “natural”, we are normally totally ignoring, in our own very special anthropocentric way, what philosopher 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 that you might find on the beach, have taken millions of years of hidden labour to exist.



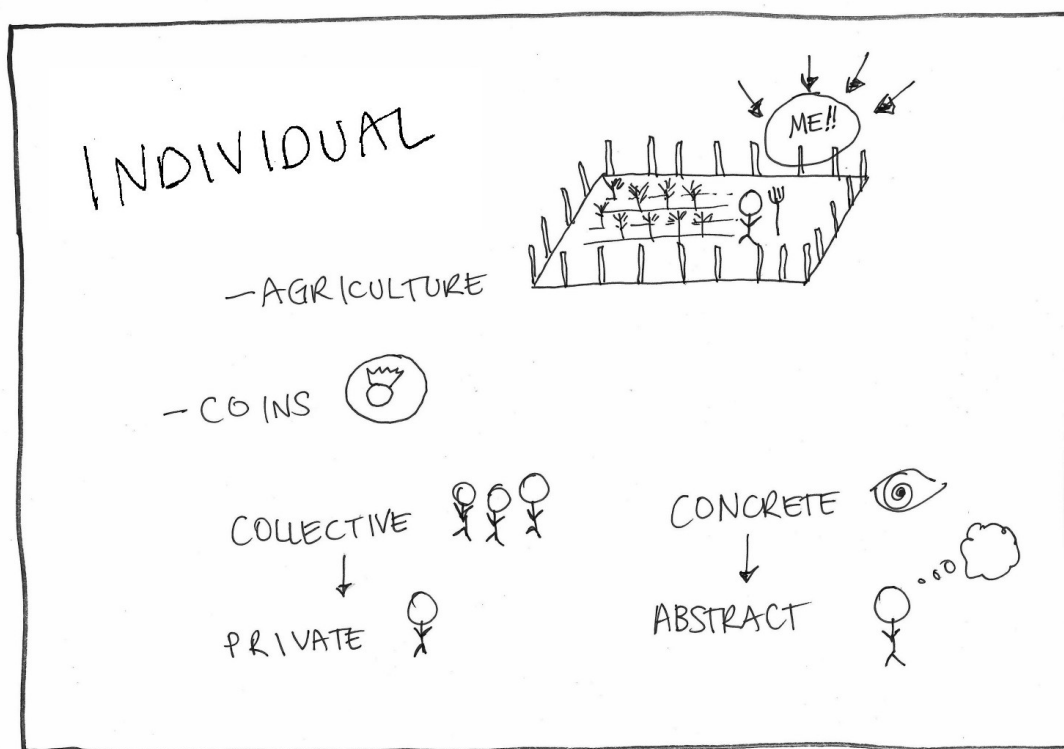
Objects are never truly separated from subjects because they don't exist in a vacuum: they are part of a network, an infrastructure. So, objects possess, are part of, and function within, an inextricable complexity – a structural complexity (so, technological, social, economic, for example) and also a functional and cultural complexity – and these complexities, for the most part, are never directly experienced by us.

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 *mean* something to us, but they are also always objects that *belong* to us. We cannot have a “personal” object that is also not physically ours.

So we can start seeing that what we call objects and what we call subjects, are not separate and instead can only exist together.

So, let's talk about THE INDIVIDUAL – THE SUBJECT

Agriculture and Coins



Generally speaking, from a practical, social function point of view, the concept of the individual starts to appear with the rise of organised agriculture. Here, we have a 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 hierarchies among people (with some people becoming more dependent on others), and above all the concept of *private property*, come 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, coins promote a sense of equality because everyone *seems* to be using a *shared* system. Everyone *appears* to be able to carry out transactions in an equal way with coins that have standard values for everybody. However, what is the hidden problem with this?

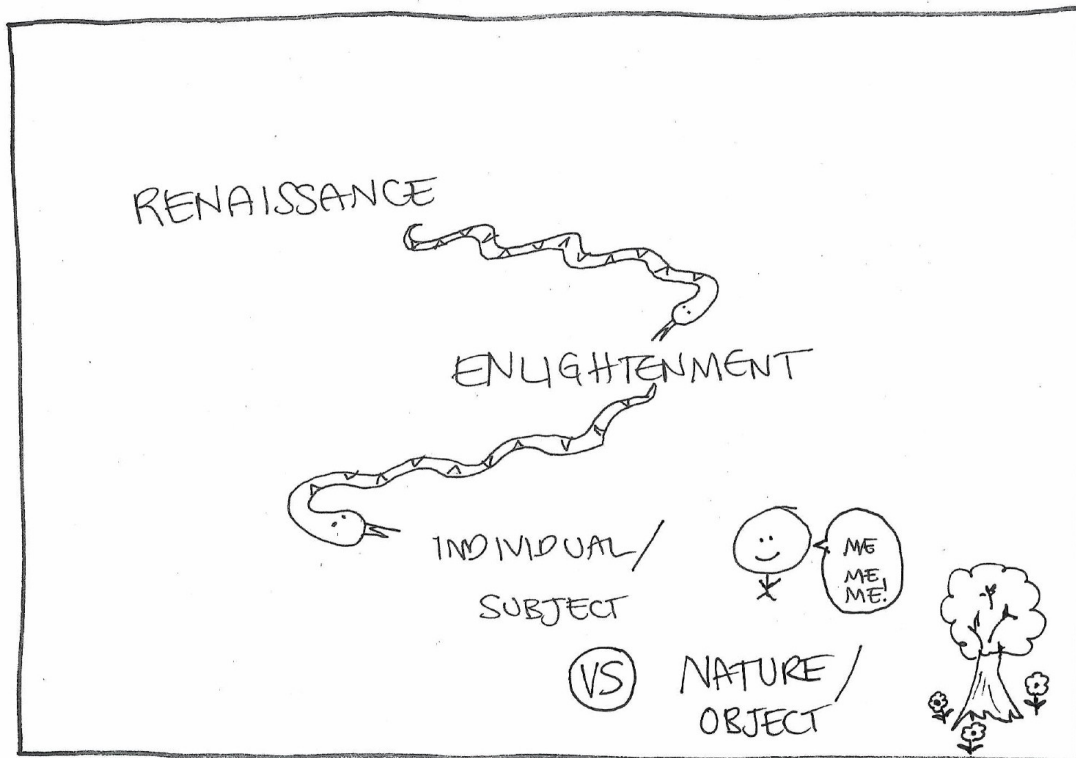
- *Who* makes up those measures/standards? *Who* makes up the *rules*?
- *Who* is able to carry out these transactions? Even so-called classical democracy was far from inclusive! The distribution of land was already very unequal according to which class you belonged (and whether you were male) and there were already massive imbalances of power in who could actually contribute to the democratic process. And let's not forget that, until very recently in so many European countries, women could not exchange contracts, own a house or have a mortgage, or own property. As a matter of fact, they themselves were considered property!

But even more importantly, with coins 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 in fact, think

today about credit cards, Google Pay and cryptocurrencies. 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. While, earlier on – and as it is still experienced in a few hunter gatherer societies today – resources were not only *collective*, but they were very *visible* and *large*, such as meat and other gathered produce, and were distributed *publicly*, this gets slowly replaced by the distribution of small, hardly visible, abstract-based, resources, like coins. On top of this, these new resulting resources – coins, money – can now be *hidden* and exchanged out of sight. Not only! They can also be *accumulated* out of sight as a *personal* resource. They become a resource for the benefit of the individual instead of for the benefit of the collective.

So, you might be asking yourself, where are we going with this? You might be thinking that this might seem like a long journey. But stay with me for a little bit more.

The Renaissance and the Enlightenment – the rise of Man



After agriculture and coins, certainly in the Western world, culturally the final and total rise of the individual – the so-called rise of Man – is the product first of the Renaissance and then of the Enlightenment. These historical periods, which are so easily considered revolutionary for our modern thinking and way of life – the bringers of progress as we know it – in fact have brought about a lot more enslavement than the freedoms they promised. The so-called scientific revolution, as the neolithic agricultural one before it – have in fact caused an imbalance of power first between these entities which are now starting to be called “*individuals*”, and then between humankind and what becomes philosophically named “*Nature*”, which is not seen any longer as

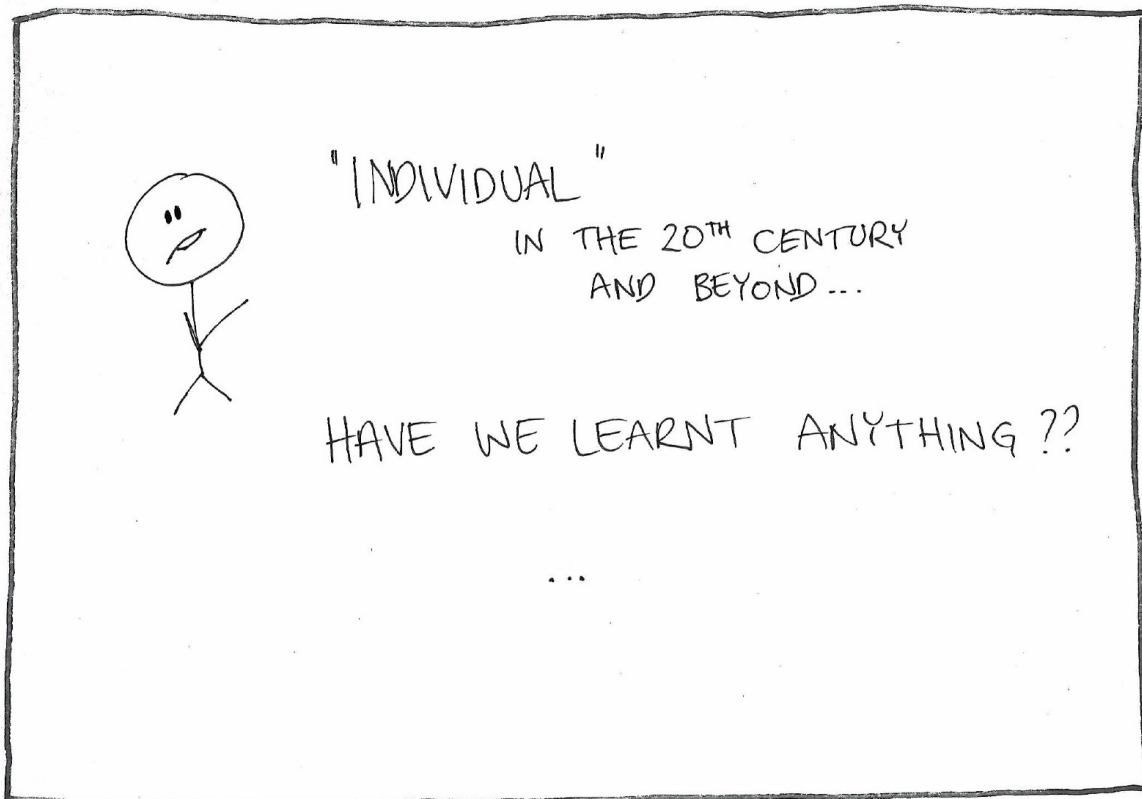
something we are part of, but has now become something external, opposed and alien – it is starting to become a series of “objects”.

But, if we look at the word “individual”, what *is* an individual? The word’s etymology goes back to the Latin “*in-dividuus/m*”, or indivisible. But indivisible from *what*? Or from *whom*?

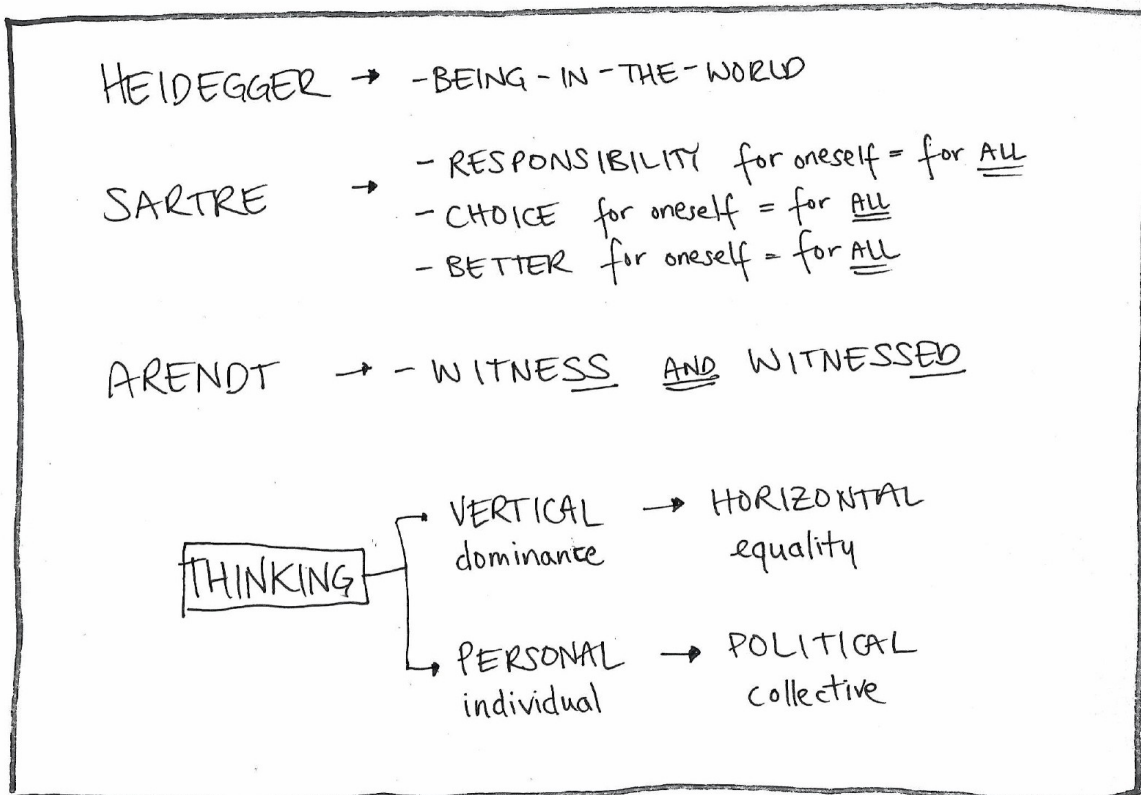
Individuals, just as objects, do not exist in a vacuum...

So where are we now? What have we learnt?

How has this idea of the individual continued to develop, especially after the biggest capitalist acceleration of the 20th century?



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



Vertical thinking (dominant thinking) starts to make way for a more *horizontal* one, and critical thinking reveals that the personal is in fact always collective, always *political* in its deepest sense, and that in fact we are but an element in a shared universe. Thinkers like Martin Heidegger talk of *inter-dependence* and 'being-in-the-world', which also starts deeply influencing the development of the western environmental movement. Others, like Jean Paul Sartre, who in the beginning had focused his attention on the freedom and the personal responsibility of each individual to make their choices, he 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 existence, but only when it is *public* and accountable – that is, when we can be a *witness* and *witnessed*. But we'll get back to this later.

MERLEAU - PONTY

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.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

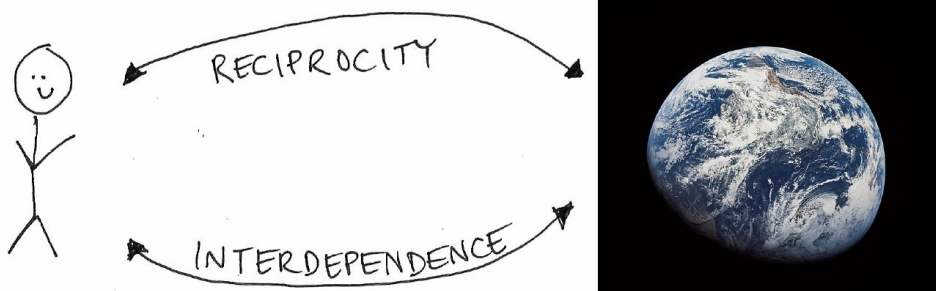


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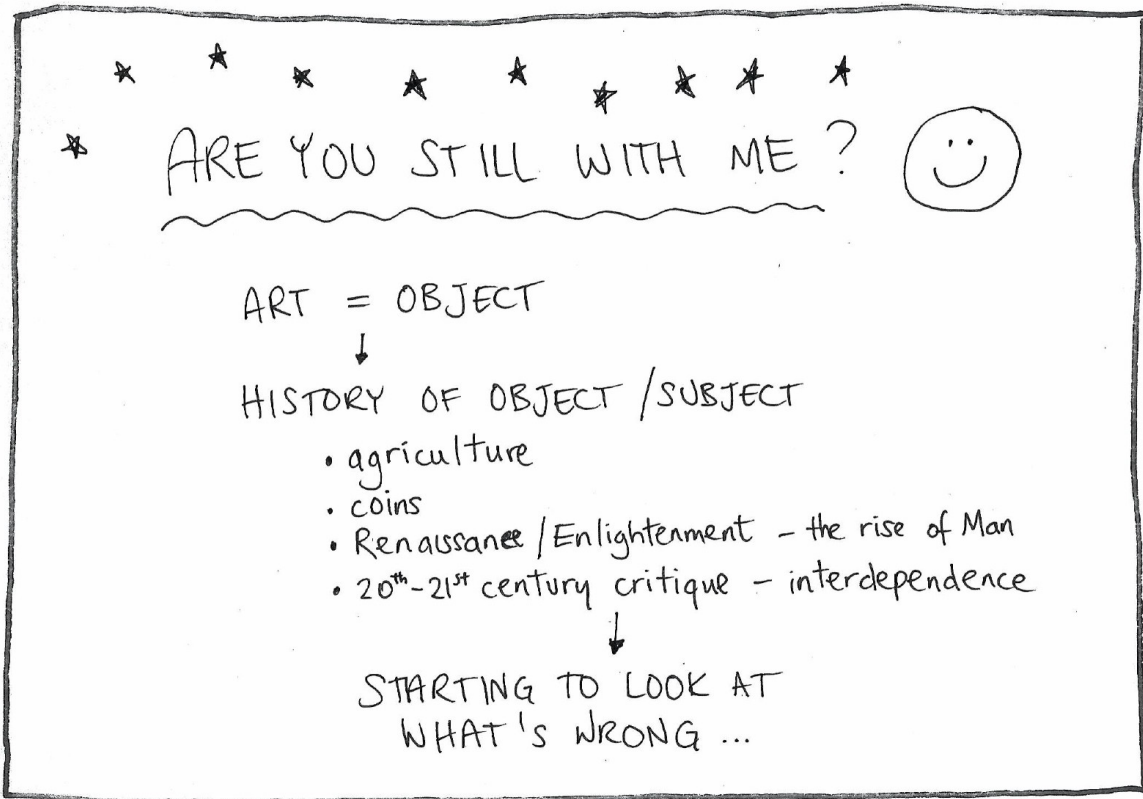
At the same time, Phenomenology builds up from purely intellectual critical exercises, to incorporate, with another philosopher called Merleau-Ponty, an analysis and a critique of how the *body* relates to objects and how objects in fact confer humanity to that body. Merleau-Ponty highlights how the political in the body and the space it occupies – and *how* it occupies it – and he talks of our relation to the object world in terms of *inter-dependence* and *reciprocity*. Basically, we are *nothing* without the world around us to make us such, and the world is *nothing* without us coming into contact with it.

Why advocate the
VITALITY OF MATTER?

Because ...
the image of dead or ... instrumentalized matter
feeds human hubris
and our earth-destroying fantasies of
conquest and consumption.

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*

We have already mentioned Bruno Latour and this important new term he coined, 'actant', to allow for inclusivity and equality in how we perceive the hidden labour processes of all that is *non-human* and *inanimate* – so of all that we so often, without thinking, and also naïvely, call objects (for example, the way mountains are not just there, but the earth has actually worked for millions of years to form them). Taking this as a her starting point, then we have Jane Bennett who talks about any matter having *vitality* of its own. What she is interested in is not just to highlight our relationship with the non-human, but to point the way to see how re-learning about, and *re-framing* how we think of the non-human – so, let's remember, all that we call objects – can make us better humans.



So, are you still with me? Remember our starting point. Our starting point was the problem of seeing art as an object. And we are trying to retrace the history of the idea of the object, and of course when we think of objects we need to think about the idea of the subject, the individual. So I am trying to take you through a journey to understand how we got to have these ideas and how they developed and how finally they are getting critiqued in more contemporary times.

So, we have seen there is now some optimism in the possibilities offered by giving up hyper-individualistic practices. But 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 - Everything is a RESOURCE

BAUDRILLARD - OBJECT?

WE own them?

Or do they own us?

ALTHUSSER - SUBJECT or...

SUBJECTED?

Heidegger, quite early in the 20th century, points out how *modernity* is the culmination of earlier *super-individualistic ideologies* (so, from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and of course from the Industrial Revolution). And how modernity not only keeps alive the power imbalance that exists in this division between subject and object. Modernity, he says, has grown this imbalance and this division exponentially, so that *humans have become themselves objectified* by their own ideology. With modernity, humans have become *measurable, quantifiable*: they are a resource that can be *marketed, sold*. With modernity, he says, everything is 'standing reserve' – something that is there ready to be *used*. Everything and everyone can be thought of as a "*thing*". And everything and everyone basically is, or can be made into, a *resource*.

Jean Baudrillard, the famous French sociologist, wrote a very important book called *The System of Objects*, which has become a classic articulation of how humans have become victims of their own *systems of dominance*: believing they are the "subject" at the top of the food chain in the capitalist system, in fact they are nothing but "subject-ed" – so, *subject* and *subjected* – to its strategies.

And it is another French philosopher, Louis Althusser, that, especially for our purposes today, shines a light on the ambivalence of this term – *subject* – which of course means not just the Cartesian thinking conscious individual (remember, *cogito ergo sum?*) but also someone under the *control* of someone or something else (like the subject of a king).



"I want you for U.S. Army : nearest recruiting station" by James Montgomery Flagg, 1917, Library of Congress, Wikimedia Commons free licence

So, again *subject* and *subjected*. Althusser plays on this linguistic ambivalence to explain how the strategies and ideologies that 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 kept going. Ideological systems of power, such as the state, religion, but also the cultural systems, *call* on us by *offering* or *assigning* an identity which we are encouraged to *accept* consensually, as if we had chosen it ourselves. In all these systems, this call is *not* so we can be the own individual subjects for which we had created these systems in the first place, but to be the subjects that most help the ideological system itself to survive.

Now, maybe you are growing impatient, and you are again asking yourselves why this long journey through the idea of the subject. But this is in fact very necessary, because we cannot understand why we consider something an object – and remember, we started by looking at the problem of ART being seen as an object – without looking at the person for whom the object exists. And so, let's go back to the object, and let's go back to my original point that art is mostly considered an object.

AS ARTISTS

- WHAT ARE SOME OF THE TASKS
WE ARE BEING CALLED TO PERFORM ?

- WHAT ARE THE IDENTITIES
WE ARE BEING SOLD ?

AND WHY DO WE ACCEPT THIS
WITHOUT CHALLENGE ?

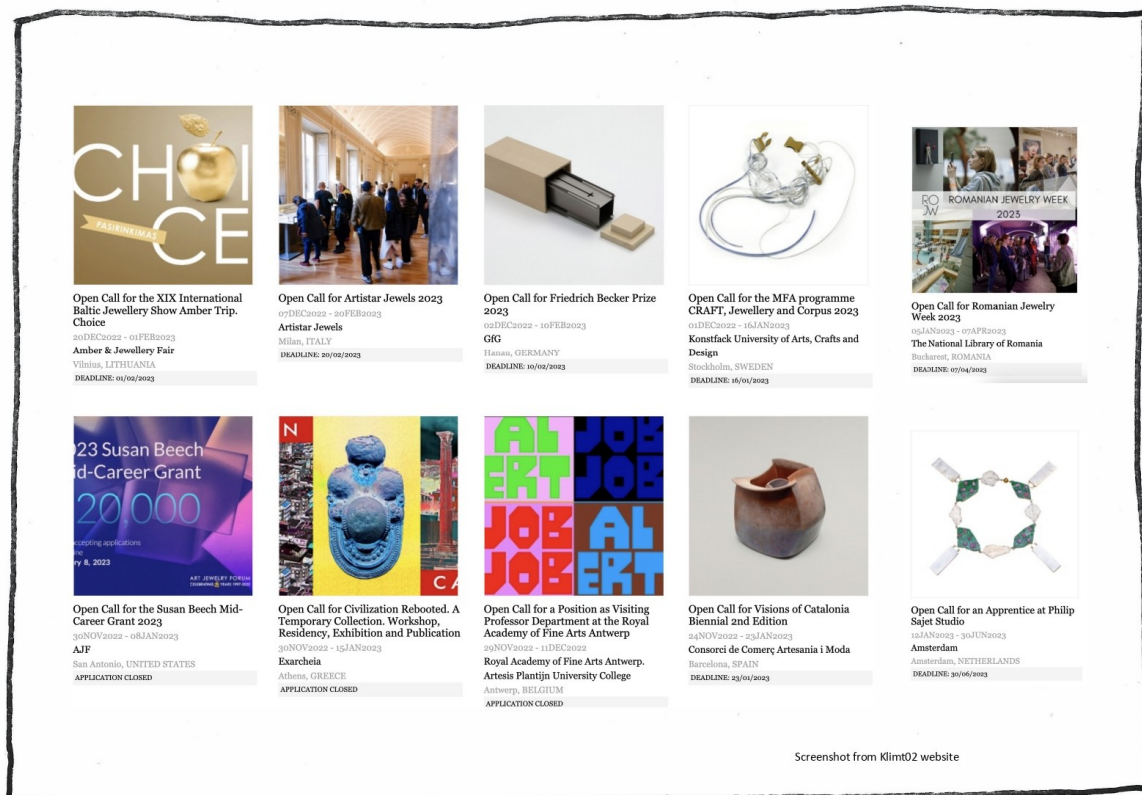
When we associate art with objects, we objectify our thinking and we objectify ourselves to a system that calls us subjects but to which we are in fact totally *subjected*, where we are called to perform a task as part of the system.

SO WHAT ARE SOME OF THESE TASKS THAT, AS ARTISTS, 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. What do these two simple words really mean? Remember, there is always so much hidden power in a word.

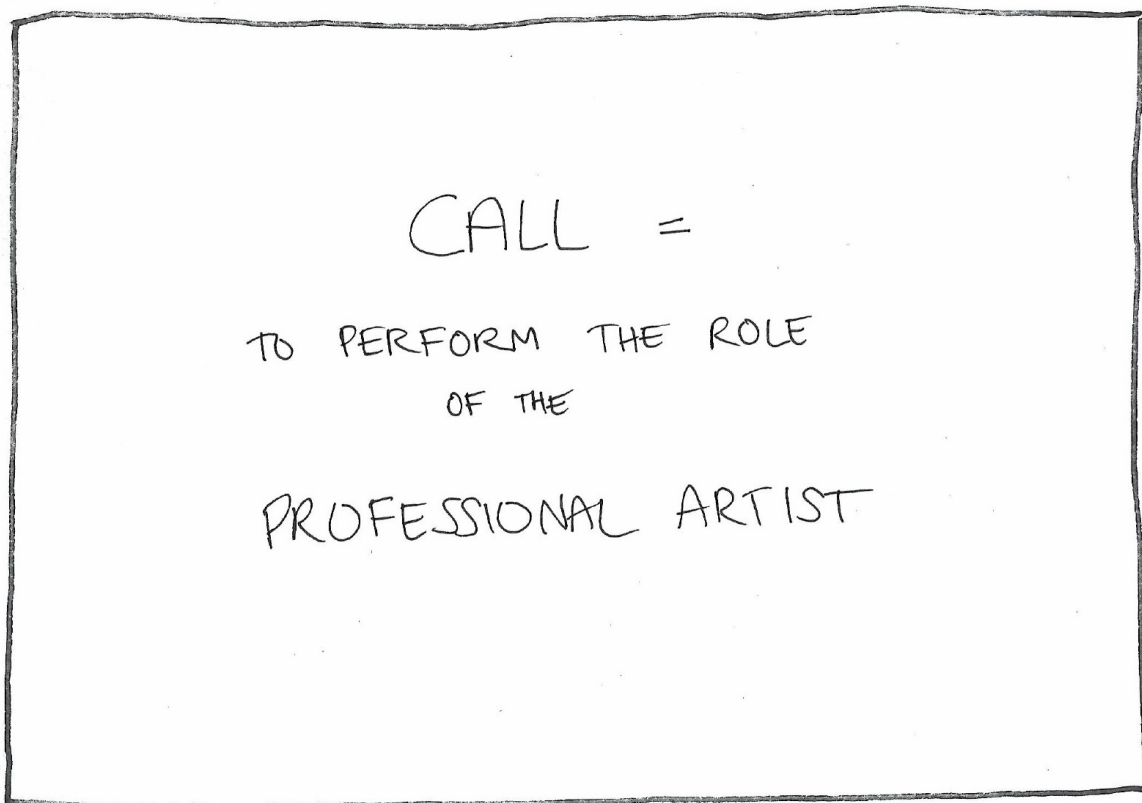
So, the word “open” gives the *impression* that *access is equal*: that all people and all practices would be included. But are they? Apart from the obvious restrictions that are often imposed – for example you have to be a certain *age*, or the work needs to be of a certain *type* and presented in a certain way (we will talk about the collection later), or it has to be of a certain *size*. And once we have jumped through these various first hoops, 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 – so where people live and what position they occupy in their society.

Just to explore a few examples: is access truly open to *any-body* on a very basic level? For example, is it truly open to everyone to know English as a foreign language enough to communicate with international organisers? And, as another example, depending on where you live, how difficult is it to undertake that type of communication on a cultural level, especially in terms of groups which are already *excluded* from certain activities in their own situation? As another example, does everyone even have access to websites where there are open calls? Does everyone have the money to participate? Most times artists have to pay for this. On top of that, does everyone have the money to send their work maybe to the other side of the world? Is it culturally acceptable for them, for example as a female, to expose themselves through their work?

Or how easy is it to write statements? Or to create and send professional images of your 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 that you have *actual open access* to a smart phone and some sort of internet connection.

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” us to fit into certain criteria, so that our work *maybe* can be seen and marketed. And organisers are also victims of the same system, mostly without realising (but sometimes they just *are* the system), because they too need their own exhibition projects to be seen and marketed.



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 so on. What it does, it calls artists to perform the *accepted role* of the *professional artist*. But accepted by *whom*? And – and think about what we were asking about coins earlier on – what is the system, what are the powers, that made up the rulebook?

Who decided:

- 1 - that there should be such a thing as the “professional artist”, and
- 2 - of what a professional artist should be like? Or what it should do? And how it should do it?



In Jean Paul Sartre's book *Being and Nothingness* there is a wonderful very famous passage where he describes a café waiter. So, he is sitting in a café, you know, like French philosophers in the middle of the 20th century used to do, and he is looking at this waiter who is not just being a waiter but living his working life **PERFORMING** the role of what a really good professional waiter should be like.

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

WHAT PROBLEMS DOES THE "OPEN CALL" CREATE ?

- OBJECTIFIES ARTIST'S THINKING
- OBJECTIFIES ARTIST



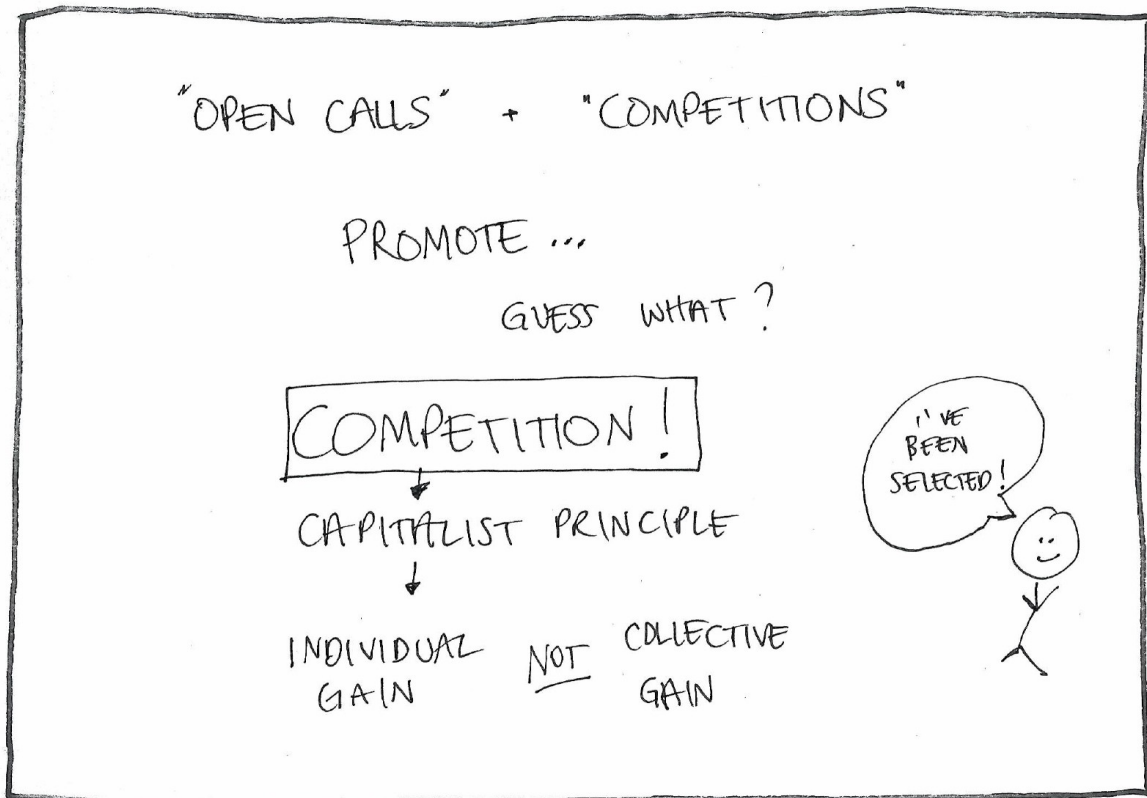
- ONLY PHYSICAL RESULT COUNTS!
ONLY OBJECT PRESENTED (OR IMAGE!!)
- STATEMENT (ARTIST'S THINKING)
OFTEN FORGOTTEN (OBJECT SHOULD SPEAK FOR ITSELF!)
OR REQUIRED TO BE SHORT

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 quantity – the *object* that is presented to be *judged*. What does this result in?

1 – The nuances of the hidden labour of thinking, of researching and of questioning, are by-passed in favour of a visible physical *result* – the object (and in fact, most of the time, only a photo / a representation of the object) – which then becomes the only measure used for selection.

2 – Statements, and we have already seen how problematic they can be at some level in terms of who can write them and in what language, might help balance this problem. However, so very often the requirements of the open call is that statements are limited to a very small number of words – you know, just a really short sentence. Or, worse, they are snubbed completely in favour of the idea that the object should speak for itself. Now – imagine the *contradiction* that we are being sold, often without even realising it! The object, this thing that on the one hand is judged as sheer product, suddenly it's meant to have the grand ability to speak for itself!

But instead, the fact that statements are shunned in this way, happens 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.



3 – The open call also thrives on the patriarchal and capitalist principles of *competition*. As such, it lives *not* on *collective, collaborative* practices but on the gain of... you guessed it, the *individual*. How?

- First by promoting a highly *opportunistic* approach, based on personal gain and often on secrecy rather than, say, shared open-source knowledge; so I need to be the winner and I need to keep what I am doing really secret;
- and second, it preys on the creation of arbitrary hierarchies and what is the ultimate division (we see this on social media all the time) between *selected* and *not-selected*. But let's not forget that this word "selection" is in itself a word that takes us back to that Darwinian terminology about evolution that has so often been grabbed and used to justify the removal of rights of populations we considered "other".

So, let's look at a very local example. [NOTE – This is local to the Wroclaw Academy audience]

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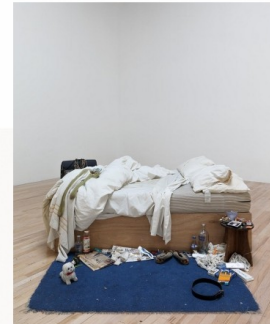
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*Wartość odtworzeniową należy rozumieć jako zadeklarowany koszt materiałów koniecznych do jej odtworzenia. Na jej podstawie ustalana będzie kwota, jaką Organizator zapłaci Autorowi w przypadku, gdy praca ulegnie zniszczeniu lub zagubieniu w trakcie ekspozycji lub przechowywania.
*Replacement value should be understood as the declared cost of materials necessary to recreate the work. On the basis of it, the amount to be paid by the Organizer to the Author in case of damage or loss of the work during exhibition or storage will be determined.

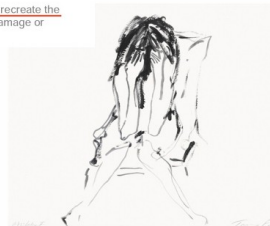
Gallery of Art in Legnica – detail from application form for 2023 Festival of Silver competition "Quality"



Pablo Picasso, Weeping Woman (1937), oil on canvas (Tate)



Tracey Emin, My Bed (1998), mixed media (Tate)



Tracey Emin, Missbelief (2013), gouache on paper

In the last three years, the Art Gallery of Legnica has changed the application form for its very well-known contemporary jewellery competition. Maybe not many people will have noticed, but if you look in the small print (why are these things always hidden in the small print??), there is an asterisk in the box where you need to put in the artist's price for the piece, and the note says that, for the purposes of insurance, the artist's price can only be calculated as the costs of materials. So, the *value* of the work is only the value of materials. This is a great example of how art is *not* seen as an *artistic process* but

- 1 - only just in terms of a finished product, an *object*, but also
- 2 - something that is completely *alienated* from the body who made it and the mental and physical *labour* that produced it.

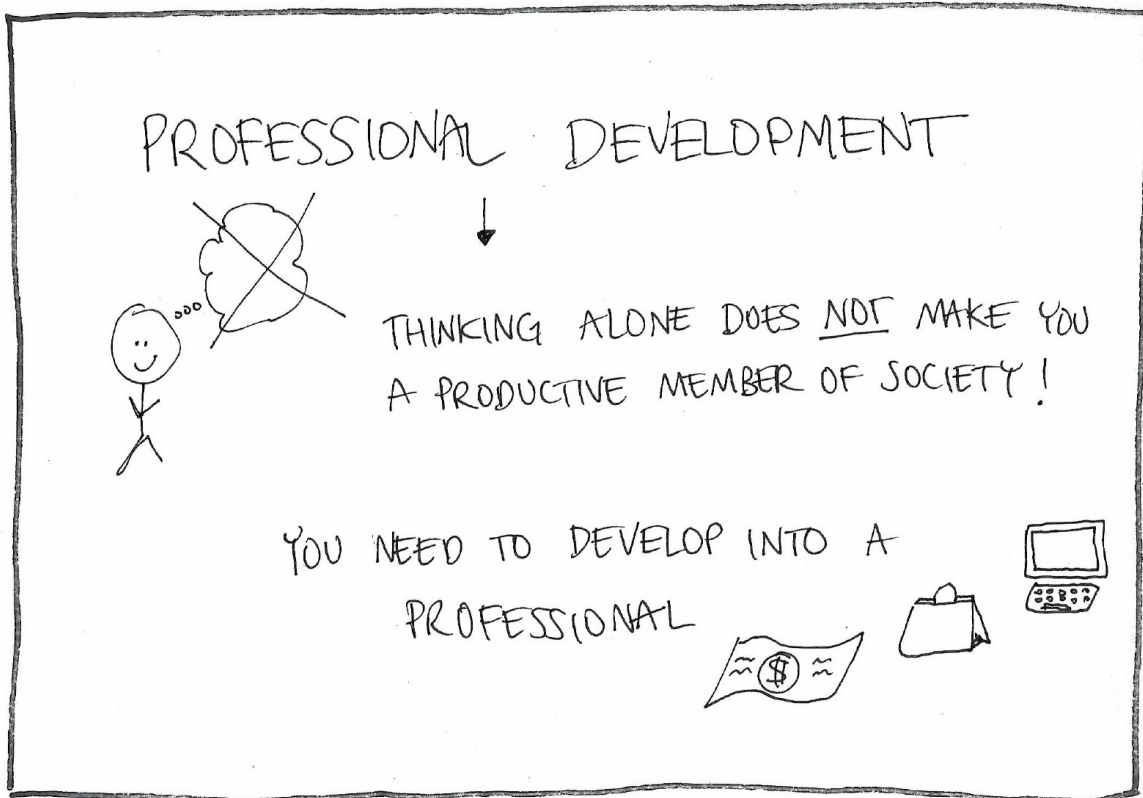
These are practices that, once again, *cancel out* hidden labour and knowledge and thinking and research that does not manifest into a quantifiable item – an object. This is bad enough in contemporary jewellery, where often the cost of materials can be practically zero. But imagine a gallery asking Tracey Emin to list her insurable artist's price for one of her drawings as the cost of some black gouache and some paper. And would be the insurance price listed for her installation "My Bed"?? Or insuring a painting by Picasso calculating the value only from canvas and a few tubes of paint! *Is this our value?*

A couple of years ago I was asked to start being a judge on an open-call global design graduate competition. At first I thought to myself, this is a great interdisciplinary contest, and the company organising it over the years has always strongly encouraged and promoted the practice of art and design. Also, I thought, the competition has such a varied panel of judges from all backgrounds, so that should be good, right? And so I agreed as I thought it could provide constructive feedback for the participants. But the feedback is not passed on, for many reasons. Believe it or not, one of the reasons, in the case of judges from big companies, is that these companies are scared of their

comments being public. And so everything is reduced to simple numbers without the possibility for nuanced considerations.

The awards and selections, common to so many areas of the art world, that fill the CVs of practitioners perpetuate 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 as *professional development*. Because their *thinking alone* could *never* be *quantified* and therefore it could *never* *qualify* them as *productive members of society*. So artists are *incomplete* unless they can *develop* the ability to be a professional, and to make a living out of their work.

Now, let's be careful here. I am not accusing anybody of doing this maliciously (although I am sure there are a few who do). But what we are doing – and we are *all* doing this – is doing it *un-critically*. The same words are used by everybody just because everybody else uses them.

So, why call it an "open call"? Why not call it exactly what it is: a "call for a submission"? At least that would say that we are submitting ourselves to a system! Now, bear in mind that, in fact, many do use this, but again often they do it because it is just "the words that we use": most don't necessarily think about the difference or what these words "call" and "submission" really mean. Or why not be honest and call it an *advert* to apply for a job? But don't call it "open", as *open* is what it is *not*.

Now, let's look at two more of these words that are all classics in judgement criteria for works of art: "collection" and "innovation". Think about how many times you have seen them written in open calls. Both of these words are so deeply rooted in a culture of both *capitalism* and *acceleration*.

THE "COLLECTION"

"COLLECTION"

- ART PRACTICE = products that fit together
- FINITE PRODUCTS = better because they make more sense
(so QUESTIONING = NOT MUCH VALUE !!)
- NEED ALWAYS TO MOVE ON TO NEXT THING
- NEXT THING NEEDS TO BE BETTER THAN ONE BEFORE
- CONCLUSIVE = EXCLUSIVE

BUT WHO MAKES UP THE RULES ??

OF WHAT FITS TOGETHER?
OF WHAT MAKES SENSE TOGETHER?

The word "collection" is particularly dangerous in the fields of fashion, textiles, design and anything portable. Just for a moment, have a think to see if any of you has ever heard of a painter or a sculptor being asked to produce a collection. This word, used everywhere, and so often adopted without critically assessing it, again, reduces art practice to:

- 1 - products that all fit together in the same criteria;
- 2 - also, it reduces practice to the idea that *finite* products, products that have reached a conclusion and that produce *conclusive* answers, are *better* because they are more cohesive, because they make more sense together. As a result, what is seen as not fitting together, not conclusive or questioning, is not of much value.

But *who makes up the rules*? For example, in the context of a competition, who is the gatekeeper for those criteria? Are artists really the ones to decide what makes a collection, what makes sense together and what doesn't according to their own thinking? What is cohesive and what isn't? And on what basis? No. It most certainly isn't. So who is it who decides those criteria, and then judges by them? *Whose rules are we asked to follow? And why?*

Furthermore, the word “collection” promotes the ideology

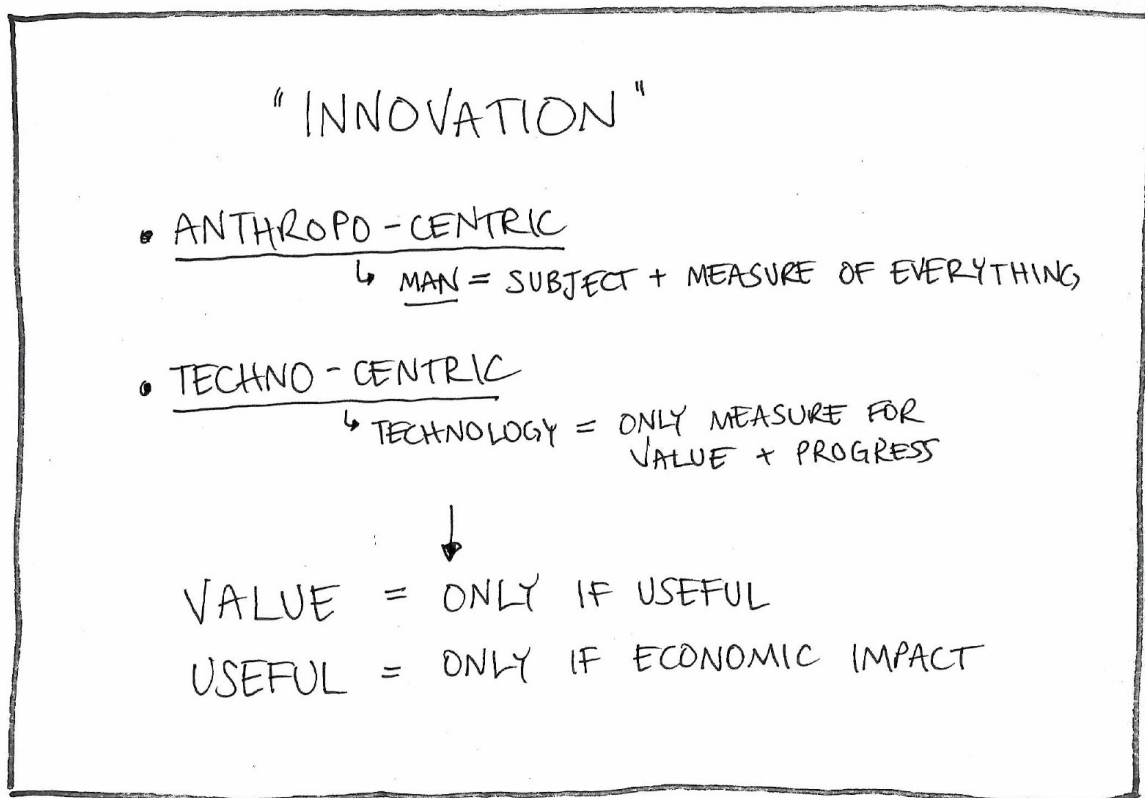
1 – that we should aim not only for something to be always conclusive, but that once something is done we should move on to the *next* one, and that the next one should be *better* than the one before;

and 2 – it promotes the ideology that *conclusive equals exclusive*, and therefore more marketable because more *desirable*;

and 3 – that what is desirable 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 subjects.

And 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.

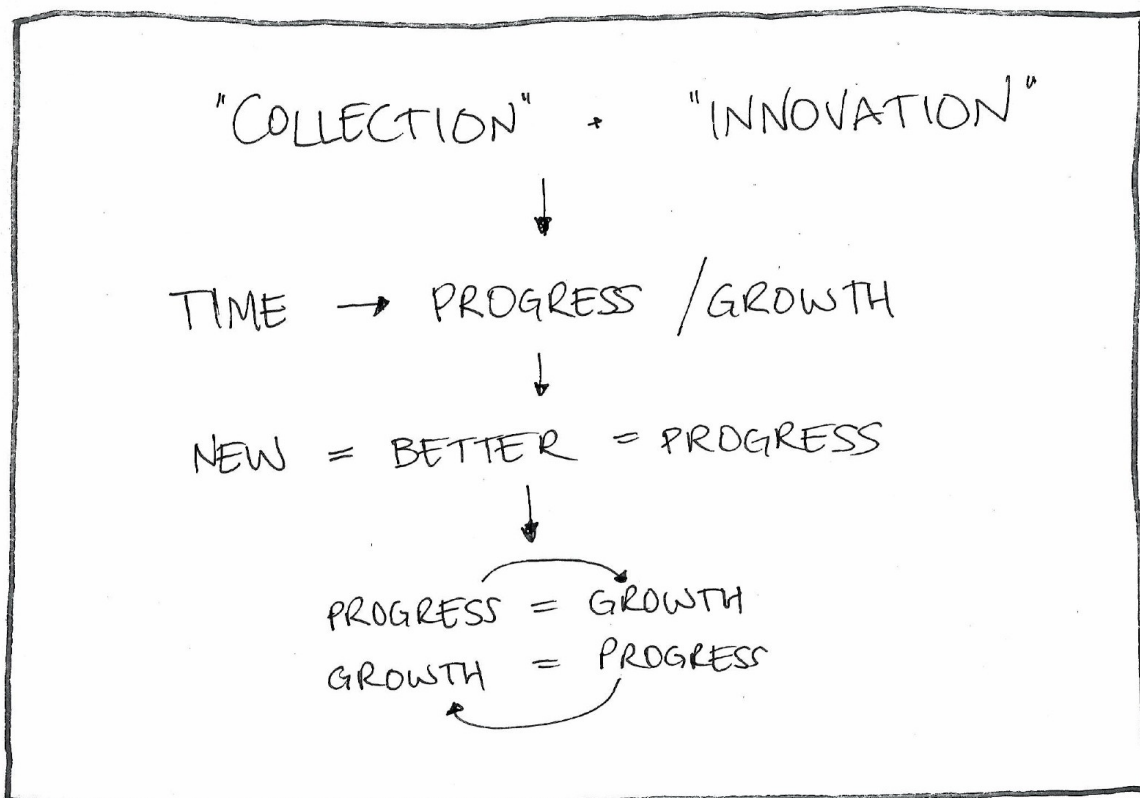
“INNOVATION”



Let’s now look at the other word we just mentioned and that we see everywhere: “*innovation*”. If we look at open calls, so often we see “we want to see pieces that show *innovation*”. But again, there is so much power hidden in a word. 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 *value* and *progress*. What this also means is that everything is measured and valued according to an *instrumental rationality*: basically, how *useful* it is. And usefulness is based, according to this ideology, mostly on its economic impact.

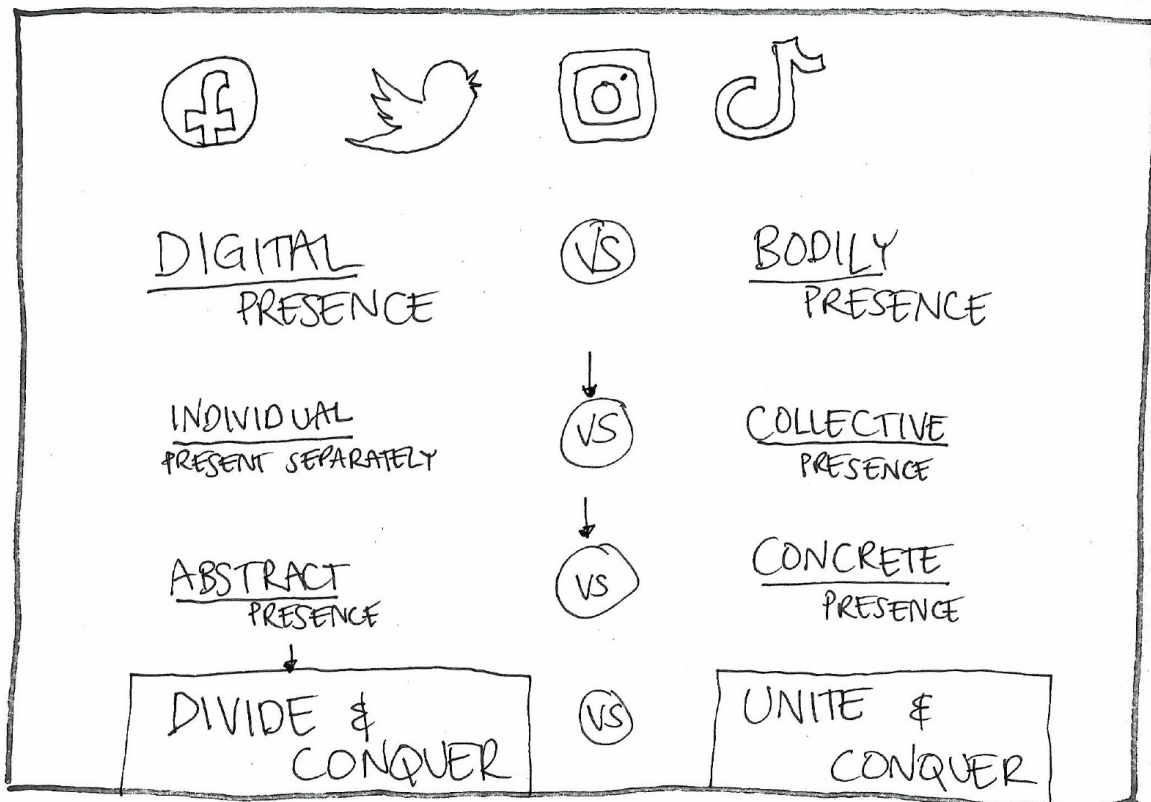
But again, useful to whom? Economic impact for whom?

Martin Heidegger finds the roots of this thinking in what is, once again, generally considered a great revolution for the Western way of thinking: that of Socratic thought. He traces how, with Socrates, beings are not seen, grasped, 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 classifications. "Man" (because it is always man, and not woman) becomes *both* 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, which 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, and valued this way.



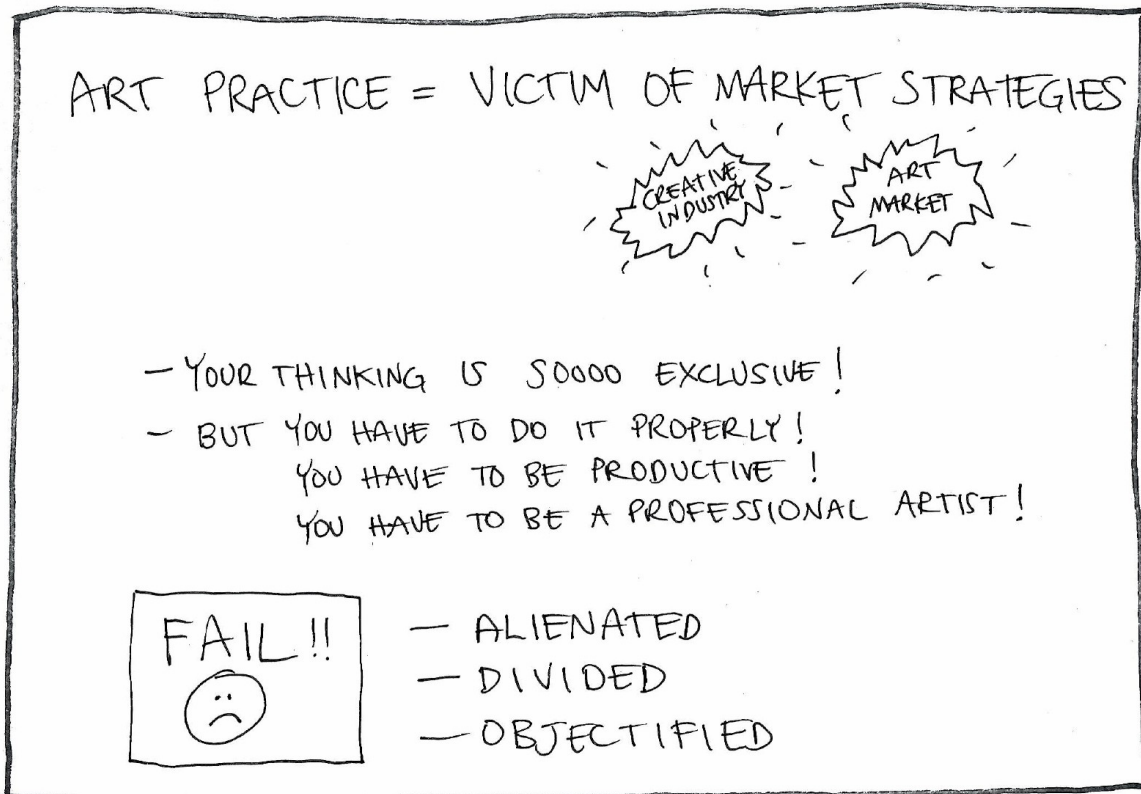
These words – "collection" and "innovation" are so strongly connected to an ideology that links the passing of *time* with *progress* and *growth*. Also, they imply that *new* always equals better, and therefore equals progress, and that progress is always equal to growth, and that growth is always equal 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 – yeah! - 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 / un-critical* scrolling. Also, the more we buy into it, the more we become willing *exploited resources* of data that can 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 Hannah Arendt – witness and witnessed in our community; the bodily presence that takes up *concrete shared* space instead of the abstract presence in a completely privatised digital space in which we feel united, and yet remain completely fragmented. In this space, we are 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 become a victim of *market strategies*. These strategies sell to the artist the idea of a *creative industry* or an *art market*. And how do they do this?

1 – They make artists believe in how *exclusive* their thinking is; then

2 - they make artists work hard to be *productive* and *employable* members of society; and finally

3 – they set the artists up so that they are very often *failed* by that very system. And how does the system fail the artists? By being:

a - ALIENATING (of the artist towards other artists, but also of the artist towards their work);

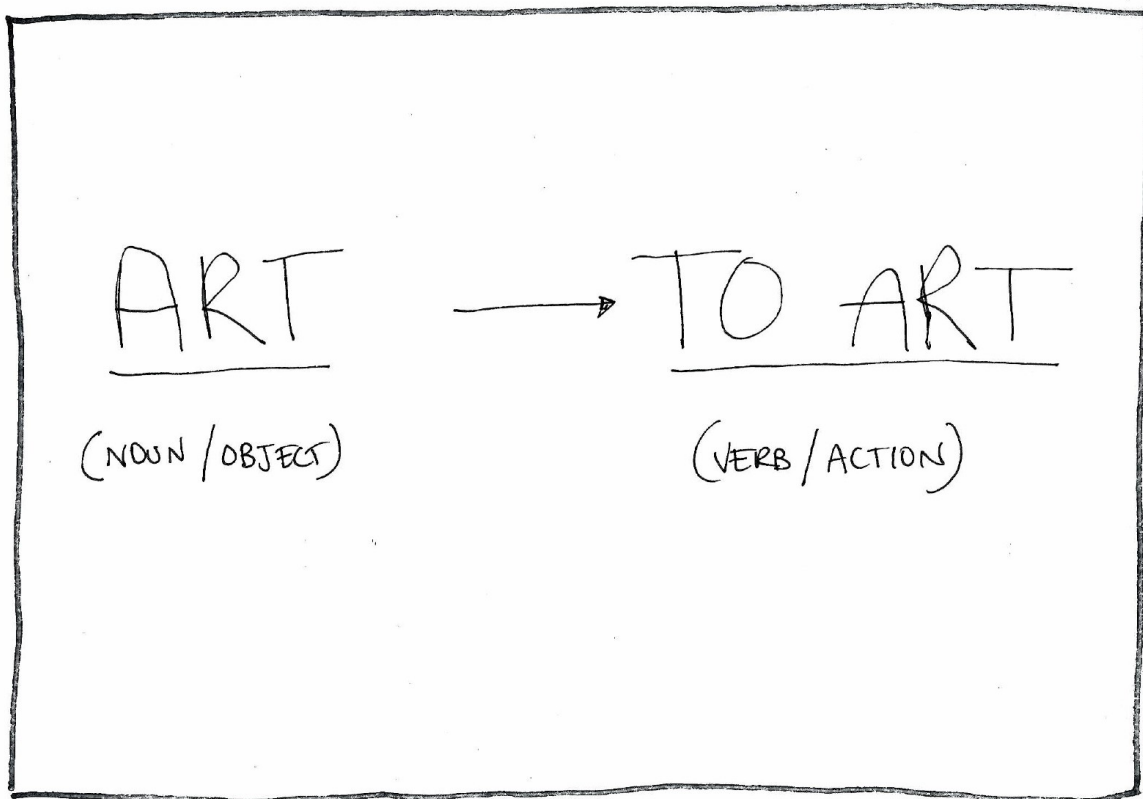
b - DIVISIVE (promoting competition instead of co-operation between individuals, but also between disciplines, promoting a discourse that encourages hierarchies, so for example, art jewellery is better than production jewellery);

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 right-wing politics in the age of completely deregulated capitalism.

So, if art is seen as objects, simply as “things” that can be consumed, marketed, sold, and this in turn makes the artists also objectified as people who can be consumed, marketed and sold, where does this leave us?

ART AS A VERB



Can we move from the idea of art as a noun to art as a verb, an *action*? Can we collectively relearn "to art"? Can we un-learn to refer to this "art-ing" as simply the making of some objects?

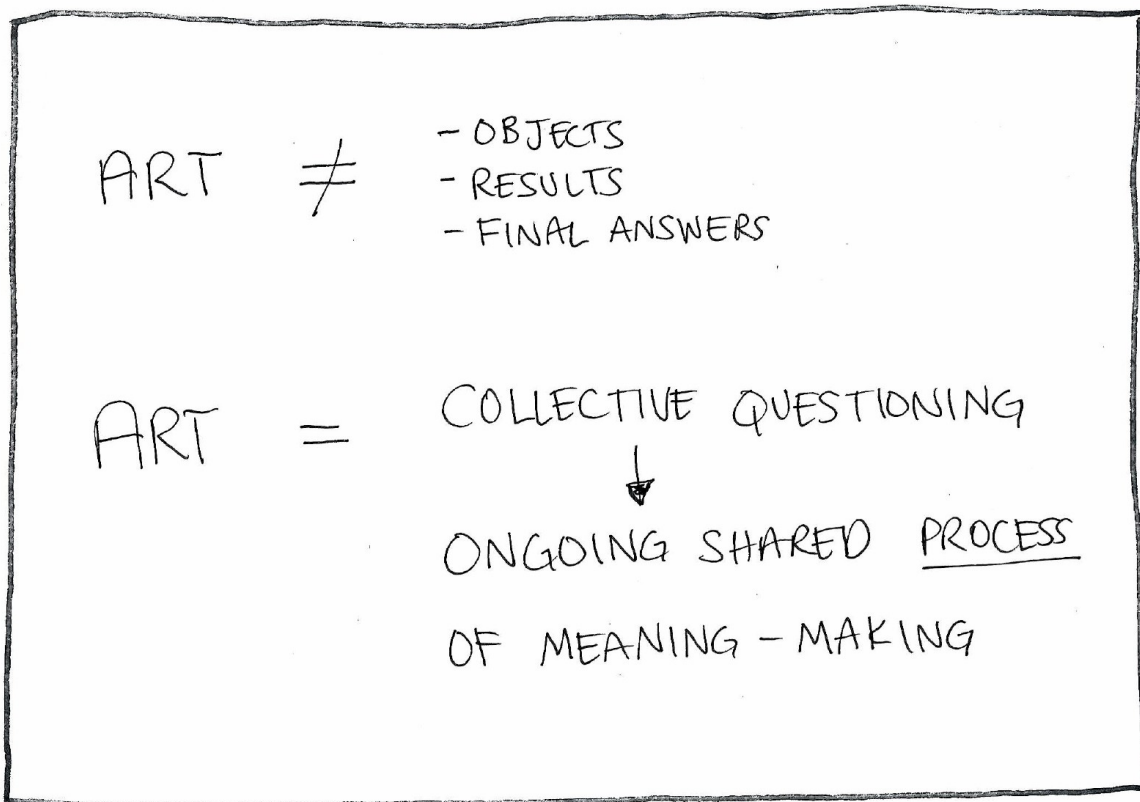
How can we reclaim the position of art and of artists not as objects, products, but as a "*doing*" and an "*acting*" force, not only capable of questioning and analysing the present and the past, but an avant-garde that drives and shapes the future?

What we can and are willing to do is up to us and how prepared we are for the task. But we must keep in mind that our choices, always and inevitably, have a bearing not just on us but on the rest of our artistic community and the world at large. Denouncing objectifying practices is for the benefit of everybody, and it requires of all of us to re-frame what it is to be a subject. But let's remember that if we continue to do nothing and to collectively fall for the trappings of the system, and to be called and to accept the identity that the system wants us to perform, *we ourselves are nothing but that system*.

So, we have now looked at the kind of world we live in, and the way it operates, and the way we operate within this kind of world. And I hope we've kind of decided, collectively, that perhaps this is not the kind of world we want to live in.

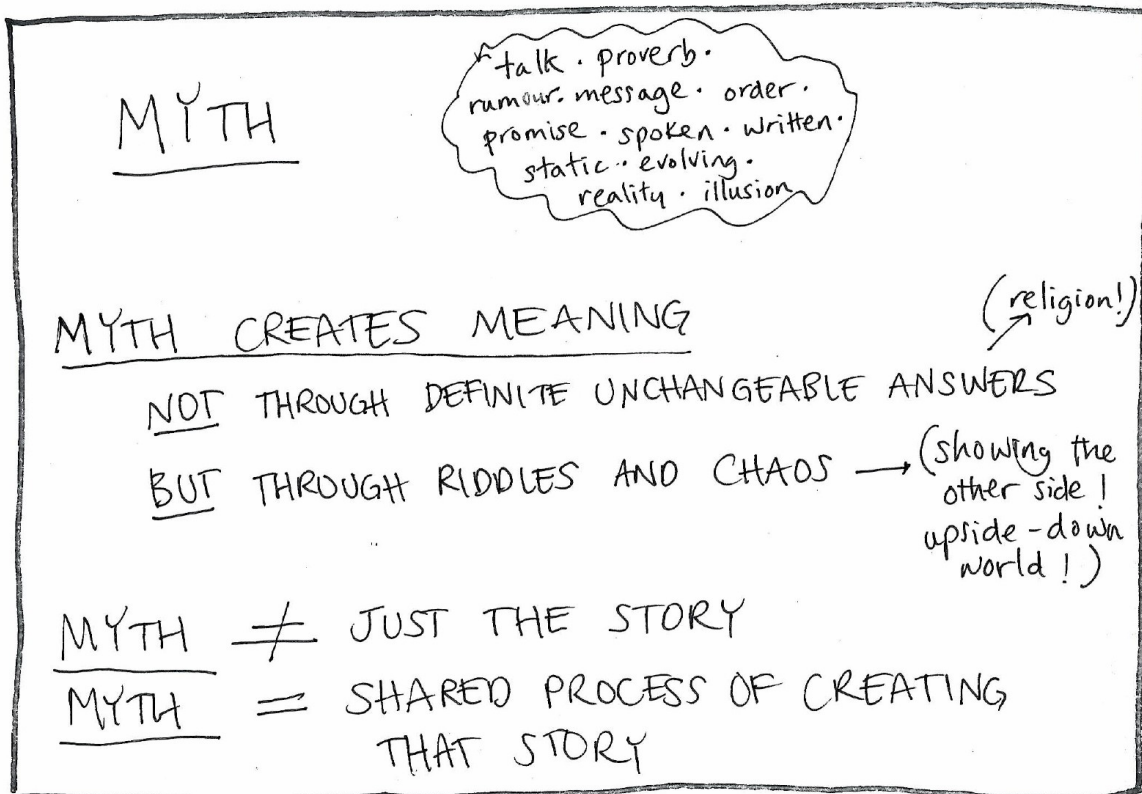
So, we will now move to the second part of the lecture. If this is not the kind of world we want to live in, as people and as artists, what kind of world do we want instead? And what can we do about this? Can we perhaps do it by looking at art in a different way?

THE MYTH-MAKERS



Going back to Martin Heidegger, he places the work of art in a *liminal* space – at the borders of what he calls the ‘strife’, between ‘world’ and ‘earth’, and what he means is the space between *meaning* and *material*. It is in this space that meaning begins. Meaning begins to be formed for a particular people of a particular time, and then, and this is the most important thing, this meaning 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 – in this space at the borders where time itself is not linear, where the future is able to look at the past, but the past is always already looking at the *future*, and the *present* in all of this is just a simple link, like a glue, it is the place where things meet and are experienced and questioned – in this liminal space the work of art is not an object but an *ongoing and shared process of creating meaning*.

So, seen in this way, the work of art is a process that is born *not* with *results* in mind *but* with *questions*: questions about how to make sense of the world. And it is a process that is never static, or never-ending. It only works over time because it is always re-questioned. It is a process not based on reaching some magical final, and then moving on, but on new peoples experiencing the process according to their time, and creating new questions and therefore new meaning, which again is not a final answer, and so on and so on.

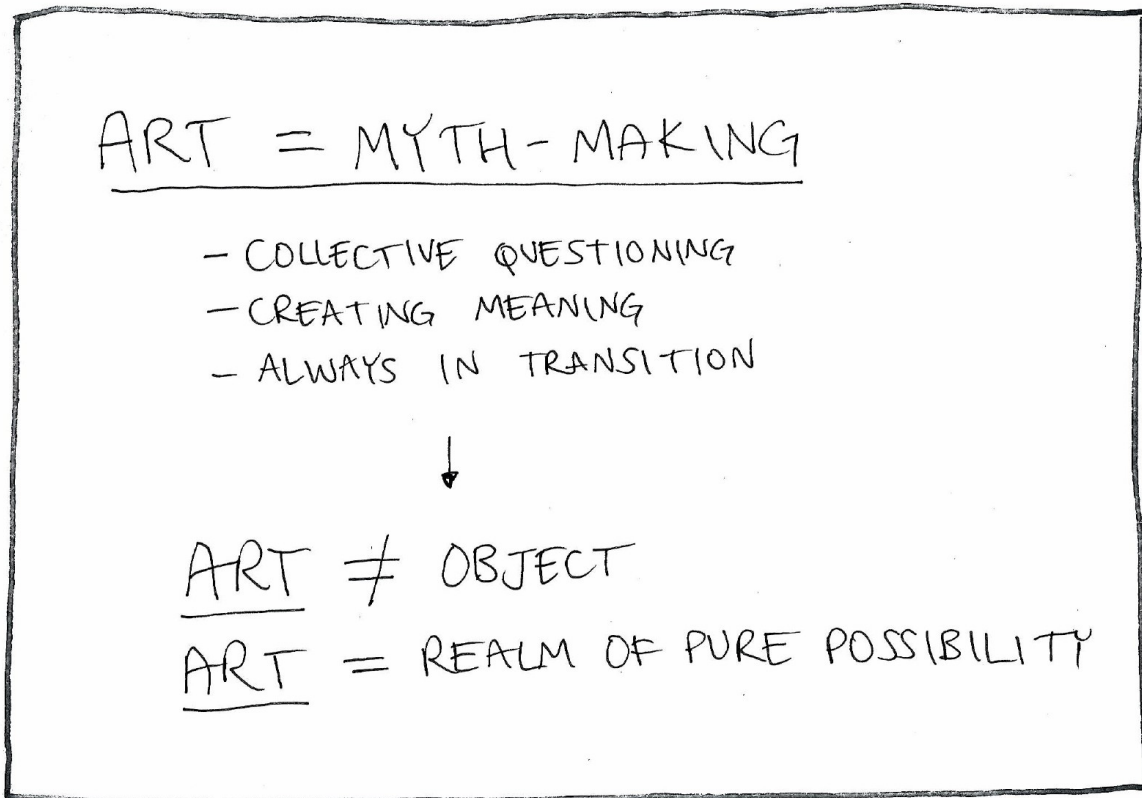


This process we've just described is also the way that the very ancient role of *myth* worked, shared by all groups to collectively and collaboratively question the world and create meaning within the world around them. Art, seen in this sense, creates meaning through *myth-making*. The concept of "*mythos*" is as ancient as our human capacity to create meaning, and it is so very complex! Even linguistically, the Greek word *mythos* is never defined. It is always *suspended* between talk and proverb, between rumour/gossip and message, between order and promise, between spoken and written, between static and evolving, between reality and illusion.

And in fact, from the birth of symbolic culture – from the time that when we as humans started creating and attributing meaning to the stuff around us – meaning has been created and preserved not through direct messages that had one constant unchangeable explanation. Myth construction has always relied not on final and definite answers, or obvious, explicit messages (that came after, with things like organised religions). Instead myths have always been constructed through riddles and chaos: showing the other side, the contrary, the opposite. Think of all the mythical stories or fairy or folk tales you know or have heard...

When mankind started becoming aware of all the things it could not explain, myth-making became what we can consider one of the most ancient *creative acts* – or work of art – creating belief systems and social structures not by showing final and correct answers but often using an upside-down world, a metaphorical world. In this kind of world, characters and spaces do not belong in one category or another, and they are not always what they appear to be, but are always *in-between* (think about Little Red Riding Hood: is she always the good girl? Or the biscuit house in Hansel and Gretel: is this house always protective?). And with the help of this world in-between, myth slowly *creates* shared conventions and values, like for example acceptable behaviours or taboos.

Above all, myth as a creative act is not just the physical story that is created, but it is the *shared process of creating it!*




My vision of art is also one of myth-making. I see art as *collective questioning*, and a questioning that is truly collective because it can at the same time witness and be witnessed because it is constantly re-examined and questioned historically. And this questioning is not done by the process in which new social values are formed (so it is not just a pure judgment by someone with new values that are different from those that were there before). This questioning is exactly that process of forming new social values.

Art, as the making of meaning, is then always in a state of *transition* and *transformation*. It is not an object, but a *realm of pure possibility* in which new configurations of ideas and relations can appear, can be born, can be experienced, and then questioned in a constant cycle. Art, then, does not need to produce answers. Art needs to maintain *chaos* through riddles, and questions so that the cycle of the creation of meaning, and with it, the *creation of culture*, can never end.

Imagine a world where finally all answers have been found! Like a world without entropy, all would be silent and immobile, and nothing would be any more.

SO, if this is our definition of art, HOW CAN WE BE THIS KIND OF ARTIST?

ANOTHER KIND OF CREATIVITY!  DAVID BOHM!!

CREATIVITY = AWAKENING / CULTIVATION / PRACTICE
OF CRITICAL SKILLS

HOW?

- ① REFLECTION - becoming aware
- asking ourselves questions
- ② DECONSTRUCTING MECHANICAL THINKING
(what we think without knowing why)
- ③ MAKING NEW CONNECTIONS
and OPENING UP NEW QUESTION

Within the world we live in, the world of the creative industry, we are made to believe that creativity is the ability to represent or to mirror some magical inspiration into a material form, a product. So let's look at creativity from another point of view, that of someone that was not part of the creative industry, but was instead a physicist. This person is David Bohm. In fact, like Stanislaw Lem, he also lived at the borders: Bohm was a physicist philosopher, like Lem was a philosopher physicist. So, Bohm wrote this book called *On Creativity* and what he says there is that *creativity is simply the result of the awakening and cultivation of our critical skills*. He says that the creative process is one where we first use reflection to make ourselves *aware* of something – so we ask ourselves questions about, for example, the way we think, and we force ourselves to *notice* how we do this, you know, mechanically, without critically looking at why we think that way – and then we *unpack* and *deconstruct* this mechanical thinking in order to open up new pathways of enquiry.

CREATIVITY = THINKING SKILLS

IN ORDER TO BE ABLE TO THINK MORE

NO FIELD / DISCIPLINE

NO MEDIUM / MATERIAL

NO EGO / TALENT

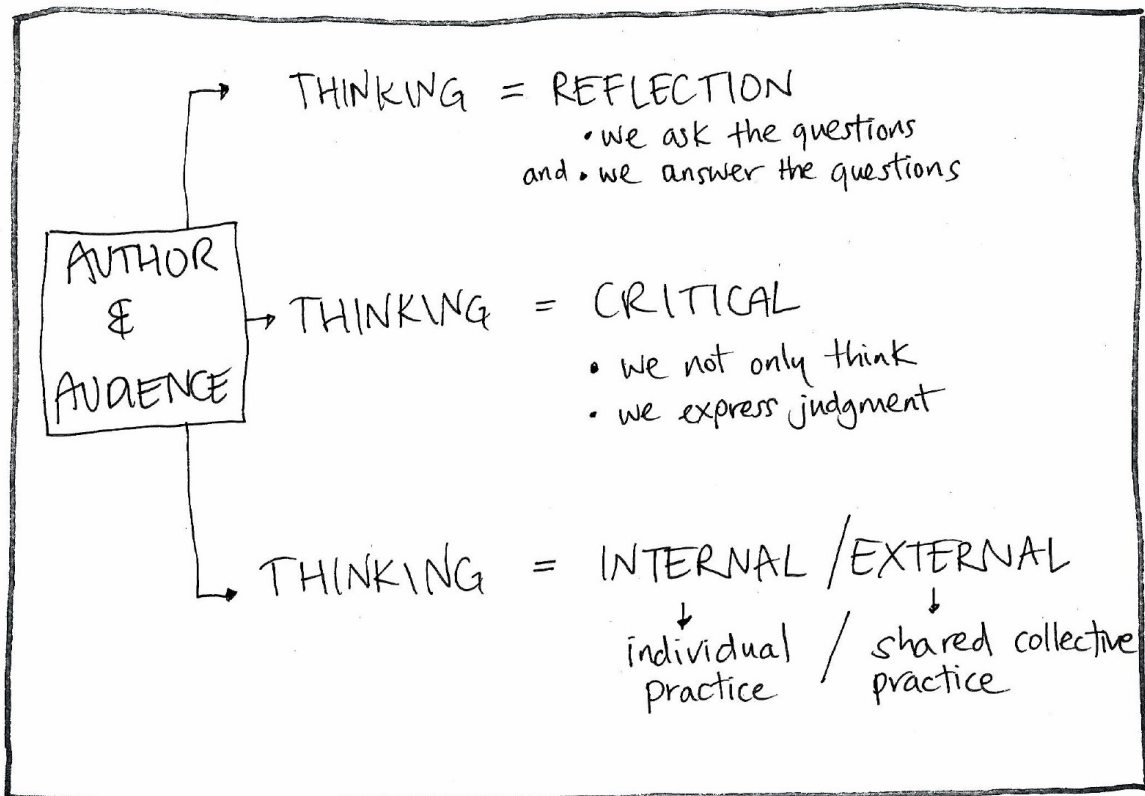
WE ARE
NOT BORN
WITH THESE
SKILLS



WE NEED TO

- ACQUIRE
 - EXERCISE
 - PRACTISE
- THEM

So, how about that? *Creativity as thinking so as to be able to think more.* Creative enquiry as a methodology. Not a product in sight! This is also a creativity that has nothing to do with art *per se* but with life itself. And the skills used in this kind of creativity go beyond the macro-boundaries of *field* and *discipline*, and also go beyond the micro-boundaries of *medium* and *material*. So these creative skills don't need to have anything to do with all the arbitrary constructed divisions that we invent, like fine art, or craft, and also, within that, the divisions between let's say jewellery, or painting. Importantly, this kind of creativity is also one that goes beyond any concept of *ego* or *talent*. So, we are not born with these creative skills. These are *skills* that need to be *acquired*, and then need to be *exercised* and *practised* to be able to sustain themselves.



Bohm was very clear about how creativity has *generative* powers. Think about the connection between the word *create* and *generate*. In a creative act that comes from a process of awareness, of reflection that has been exercised and practised, we create new connections but also new reflections, new questions. And so, we are forced to exercise our skills not only as creators, or *authors*, but, because we are constantly looking back and forth through reflection, asking ourselves questions, we are forced to exercise our skills also as our own *audience*. In this creative act we also create *values*, and, as we have seen before, our personal value-making does not only affect us as if we lived in a vacuum but it has much wider, if not universal, repercussions. When we *say* something (to ourselves or others), we make choices that affect both ourselves and others. But we also affect ourselves and others when we *listen*, and in the way we listen.

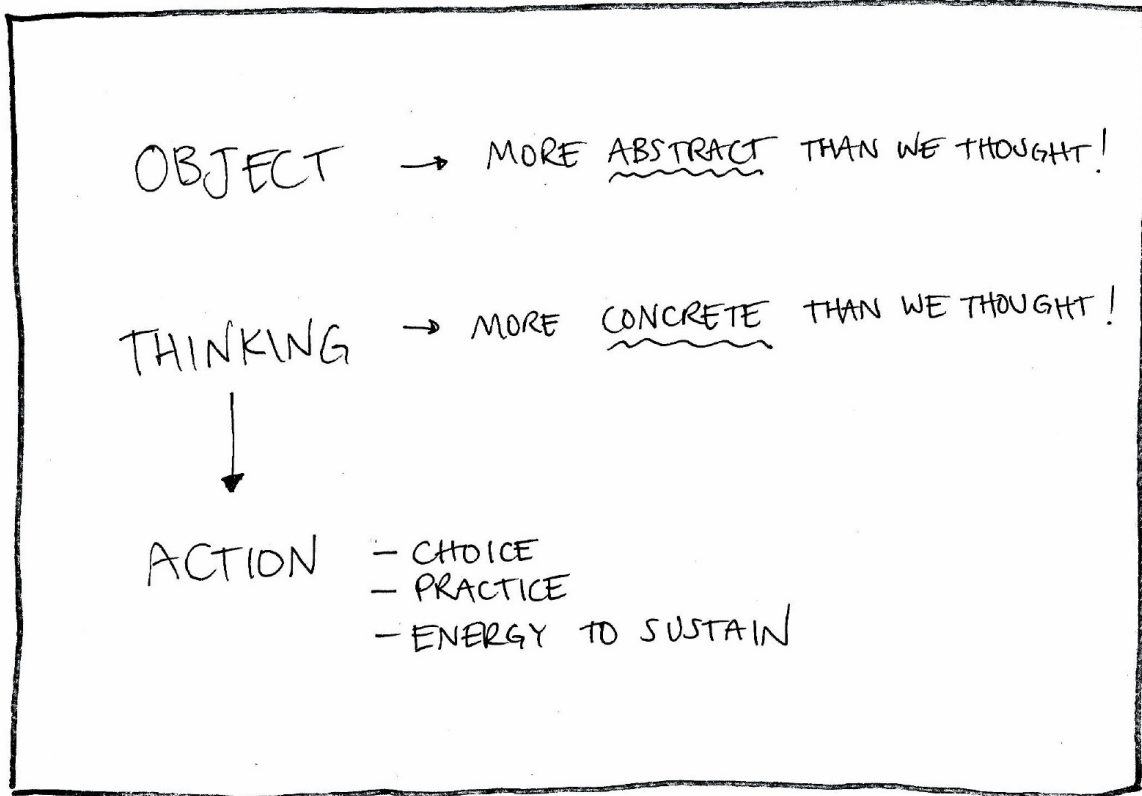
Stanislaw Lem also made this point very clear. We need to develop our critical thinking not only in what we do and how we do it, but also in what we consume, and why and how we consume it.

This is also how Hannah Arendt defined “proper” thinking. Thinking is not just random stuff that goes on in our head – because if we do that, generally, we always try to just agree with ourselves! Instead thinking is expanded to the point where we are able to express *judgment* on what we are thinking. So proper thinking is *critical* and *reflective* thinking – a thinking when we can be *both author and audience*.

On top of that, Hannah Arendt said that this process has to be a *shared* process, a public process. So we start with our *internal dialogue* – this process of back and forth critical reflection with ourselves in which we are both the ones who ask questions and the ones who answer them. And this internal dialogue is what makes us aware of the *external* dialogue with others – where our criticality has to be *confronted*, and then *practised* and *maintained*, not only individually but collectively. And this is how, through critical reflective thinking, we create values. This is how we

become the myth-makers. When we can be critical, when we can be both author and audience, and then make this process a shared public one.

Thinking, as a creative practice, is then a *creative act* that is performed, exercised and practised individually and as part of a collectivity.



Now, let's look at this word – act... In the first part of the lecture we have looked at the philosophy behind the object. So we have seen how what we call an object something that seems so physical and so concrete, is in fact a lot more abstract than we thought. And here we are starting to see how thinking, which we perhaps thought as an abstract thing, is actually a lot more concrete and physical. Thinking – this kind of thinking that we have been talking about – is an *act*, and *action*. How?

1 – It doesn't just happen: we have to *action* it by choice.

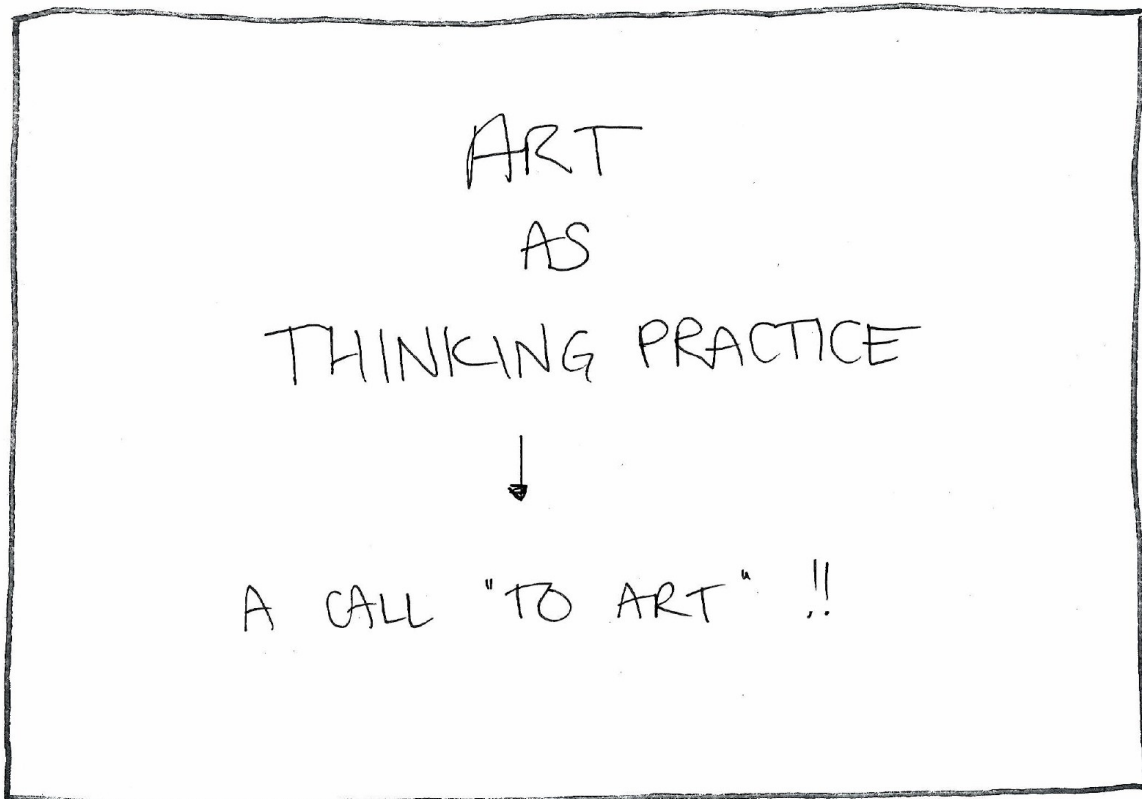
2 – It has to be exercised, practised.

3 – Because it requires a lot of energy to sustain itself. Remember what we have said before: the aim for this kind of thinking is not to produce answers or results, but it is a continuous questioning (internal and external, individual and shared). It does not need to produce anything other than more thinking. And to do that it needs to have constant energy so that the process never stops.

Thinking is, to combine some of Lem's own words, a 'Nothingness' – a 'Perfect Vacuum' of 'Imaginary Magnitude' from which we continuously have to engage to find the way to *create something other*. The value of thinking, in the words of Hannah Arendt, is not that it finds knowledge or answers, but that it 'constantly returns to question, again and again.' She says that '[T]he business of thinking is like Penelope's web (remember, from the Odyssey?); it undoes every morning what it has finished the night before. Because the need to think ... can be satisfied only through thinking'. Thinking as such can never be satisfied or stopped by the acquisition of information, of knowledge, of answers, of results. Instead, it is exactly the *chaos of continually*

asking questions that remain unanswered and unanswerable, that is the energy that keeps it working.

CONCLUSIONS



And so, what about art seen in this sense? *Art as thinking practice*. And art as a thinking-for-thinking's-sake. Art that has nothing to do with objects, products. An art where being an artist does not mean to be a painter, or a jeweller, or a sculptor, or a designer. This is a creativity that we can *all* acquire, and then that we can *all* practice. It is a shared, truly *open* and *democratic* art.

Art so intended is not a means to an end to make objects to be marketed and sold, or to seek answers in the form of knowledge, or to solve problems. Art as critical thinking – art as critical questioning – is a way of bringing those problems to the surface, of revealing their presence.

All of this, as we said, has to be practised!! So *this* is our practice as artists! These are the skills that we need to acquire. This is what we have to exercise, to repeat over and over, and to refine.

Art as thinking-for-thinking's-sake is not an art-for-art's-sake, but an art for *existence's* sake. Heidegger thought that our very existence depended on our ability to question. He said that 'only because we can question ... is the destiny of our existence placed in the hands of the researcher'. And he didn't mean researcher as a scientist, or a university professor. He meant researcher as the person who is able to research, to question. He meant the person who is not afraid to leap into the *nothingness*, the person who is not afraid of the *freedom of possibilities*.

So, at the end of this lecture, as I did at the end of the catalogue essay, I ask this question? *Are we ready to be that person?* What are we doing to be this kind of THINKER, this kind of PRACTITIONER, this kind of ARTIST?

NOTE

This lecture was delivered at the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław, Poland, on Friday 20 January 2023. This text and slides have been assembled by myself, the author, as a dissemination aid. The text comprises elements of a lecture delivered in Bratislava as part of the Šperk Stret Conference on Contemporary Jewellery on 23 September 2022, and elements of the essay I wrote for the publication associated with the Cosmos Lem Jewellery exhibition project. Both constitute elements of my current research.

As it is my custom, I do not attach full quotations and bibliographies to lectures to allow attendees to re-read the text free from academic constraints. I have instead included, as usual, a suggested reading list for those who wish to delve deeper into the subject. Most of the texts suggested can be found easily in PDF format online and for free. Some of the very recent ones might be more difficult to acquire that way, and therefore have full bibliographical information, but it is worth trying.

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- *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (second edition, 1969)

Althusser, L

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- *The System of Objects* (1968)

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- *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things* (2010), Duke University Press

Beuys, J. (2004) (Harlan, V., ed.) *What Is Art?*, West Hoathly, UK: Clairview Books

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- Jane Bennett quote from *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things* (2010), Duke University Press, p.ix

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