

A CALL TO ART
or
'THE TURBULENCE OF A MORE ORIGINARY QUESTIONING'¹

I wish to preface this piece of writing with an obvious statement: This is an essay. And then I wish to follow with a less obvious question, nevertheless so often asked: But is it art? And it is not in the search for an answer but in the exploration of the far-reaching cosmos of this question, and its implications, that I would like you to embark with me, under the auspicious inspiration of Stanislaw Lem.

If someone had asked me what art was many years ago, as a spectator I would have been left quite dumbfounded by the question, puzzled by how obvious I thought the answer to be and yet completely aware of not being able to articulate it. Even when I personally became involved with *this art stuff*, it took a primal creative event for me not to start finding that answer but experiencing the depth of the question.

I suppose I was quite lucky at the time to witness the division of a cell: to witness, as a mature art student, the moment I became aware of a *personal* and an *artistic* self. Fascinated by this generative event, I proceeded to observe its development, and was quick to notice how the two were symbiotically related – resolutely embodied in one experiencing body, and yet embroiled in an unresolved dialogue about authorship, not only as in who was making what, but, most interestingly, about who was making whom.

This was no solipsism either. Granted, I had experienced the phenomenon as a result of reflective writing. Yet, as I had observed it within that laboratory that the academic environment is considered to be, I quickly proceeded to examine it and look for answers through that oh-so-revered scientific investigative method that is the academic essay. But this only produced a further impasse. How valid was a definitely demarcated dichotomy between artist and audience? And was it possible that in the creative act of reflective writing one could solve at once both Barthes's 'death of the author'² by unifying its function with that of the reader, and, through that, also 'reexamine ... [and] ... reapportion' Foucault's resulting 'void'³ which he blamed on the author's demise?

As an eager (perhaps even presumptuous) art student, this left me rather proud (perhaps even smug), but with a heap more questions. A short-lived moment of order, positing only more possibilities, and more work. More observations followed, and a dissertation in which, investigating the issues of trust (or lack of) in my own authorship, I questioned my own assumptions about the *ingredients* necessary to be an artist. At the time, I was immersed in craft-specific as well as more general contextual theory. And yet, really, I was still a complete outsider who had never even contemplated until three years earlier that I could be an artist (or know what being one really was). The large amount of pedagogical and socio-cultural baggage I was carrying meant that I identified those ingredients, very canonically, as Creativity, Skills and Intention. And on to my undergraduate dissertation I proceeded.

1 Heidegger (1976; 1998), "What is Metaphysics?", p.92

2 Barthes (1977)

3 Foucault (1977), p.121

Having spent the last three months immersed in the work of Stanislaw Lem, the scientist *philosopher*, the irony is not lost on me that it took a *philosophizing* scientist to teach me about questioning, and to steer me into a territory where I could learn the importance of discovering irrelevance in a line of enquiry. Physicist David Bohm's book *On Creativity*⁴ first of all uncovered how stale and clichéd my interpretation of creativity was, as the ability to represent or mirror some magical inspiration into a material form, without possibly considering the source of that inspiration or the mechanisms that governed it. Bohm attuned me to a different apprehension of creativity as resulting from the awakening and cultivation of critical skills, using reflection to first raise awareness of and then to unpack and deconstruct one's mechanical thinking in order to open up new pathways of enquiry. Creativity as thinking so as to be able to think more. Creative enquiry as a methodology.⁵ A creativity that had nothing to do with art *per se* but with life itself, its skills transcending the macro-constraints of *field* and *discipline*, let alone the micro-constraints of *medium* and *material*, with all their arbitrarily constructed divisions. Importantly, a creativity also transcending any concept of *ego* or *talent* while remaining imbued with care and consideration, and also still needing to be acquired, exercised and practised to be able to sustain itself.

Bohm was clear about the *generative* power of creativity. A tautology perhaps, but a necessary one. In a creative act stemming from practised reflection we create new connections but also new reflections, and we are forced to exercise our skills not only as creators, or authors, but also as our own audience. In this creative act we also create values, and I am with Sartre here when he says that 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.⁶ When we *say* something, we make choices that affect ourselves and others. But so do we when we *listen*.

Such a creative act, then, starts appearing never to be fixed. It is always happening in the exercise and practice of its own faculties, and it is always looking back at itself while looking ahead. The creative artist becomes a liminal figure, *avant-garding* because aware, at once watching over the past and watching out for⁷ the future of both tradition and history. But the artist does not operate in a liminal territory in terms only of temporality. The reflective artist is able to move across the phenomenological realms of interior and exterior spaces, both personal as well as physical. They are also able to move across the realms of the concrete and the abstract, the real and the metaphorical, not only in thought but in the materiality of its manifestation. And again, they are able to move across the realms of the individual and the collective, where one's creativity is never exercised or practised – as also one's creative act is never experienced – in a vacuum but always as part of our relational being-in-the-world.⁸

Heidegger placed the work of art in a liminal territory too, that of the 'strife' between 'world' and 'earth'⁹, of meaning and material. It is in this liminality, in this strife, that meaning is first bestowed and grounded: it is where meaning begins. But it is also where it starts being experienced and therefore preserved and made historical, once again bringing both creator and audience into the meaning-making of the creative act. It is because of, and within, this liminality that art creates meaning through *mythos*, a concept so complex, unable and unwilling to be bound even etymologically, forever suspended between talk and proverb, between rumour and message,

4 Bohm (1996; 2004)

5 Marzali (2014), pp.14-15, quoting Bohm (1996; 2004), pp.1-32

6 Sartre "Existentialism is a Humanism", in Kaufman (1956), pp.287-311

7 For the etymology of the word *avant-garde* and related entries see Online Etymology Dictionary at <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=avant-garde>

8 As formulated in Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1926; 1980)

9 Heidegger (1950; 2002), "Origin of the Work of Art", pp.1-56

between order and promise, between speech and writing, between static and evolving, between real and illusory¹⁰.

From the birth of symbolic culture, meaning has been created and preserved not through direct unambiguous messages (even our fairy tales are so much more complex than modern moral readings would lead one to believe!) but through riddles and chaos: through 'various seemingly conflicting and irreconcilable messages' and 'ambiguity', 'convey[ing] opposite messages to "opposite" sections – uninitiated and initiated – of society itself, so that the contradictions in the myth express ... the essential contradictions buried in the social structure.'¹¹ Myth-making is one of the most ancient of creative acts, generating and establishing belief systems and social structures via early humankind often using an upside-down world to create meaning out of a growing awareness of the inexplicable – such as the cycles of birth and death and waxing and waning of the moon, and the rising and setting of the sun – and/or depicting metaphorical in-between spaces, acts and characters to help establish shared conventions, such as accepted behaviours and taboos.

Anthropologist Victor Turner wrote much about liminality and its link with community in the context of initiation, something strictly linked with myth. Rites of passage are intrinsically liminal states in the process of transition, 'a becoming... a transformation'. But they are also employed in communal changes, such as 'go[ing] to war' or the 'passage from scarcity to plenty' for example at times of harvest. In the myth-enactment of rites of passage, not only do the rituals portray an inverted ambiguous world, but the individuals are also placed in a symbolic liminal 'condition ... of ambiguity and paradox', not born nor dead, not of their world nor of that of ancestors, often in darkness in the midst of daylight, often secluded but as part of a group, present yet 'invisible'. Meaning is created and established, as Heidegger also says of the work of art, 'giv[ing] an outward and visible form to an inward and conceptual process'. Liminality for Turner is as creativity is for Bohm: the 'realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.' Crucially, for both, this space of 'betwixt and between'¹² is also one where one needs to guide oneself or be guided into.

It is no surprise that Richard Ziegfeld, in his monograph about Lem, calls him 'The Marginal Man', first and foremost because he, too, understood his double role as both 'consumer' and 'creator'.¹³ And in his *A Stanislaw Lem Reader*, Peter Swirski calls him 'A Stranger in a Strange Land'¹⁴. Of course all Lem's output sits in the context of science fiction, a genre born in itself as a new form of meaning-seeking myth-making. And yet, he defies categorisation as a writer, a futurologist, a philosopher, a scientist. In 'his writings, which constantly redefine and reinvent the concept of "literature", Lem plots the course of tomorrow with the imperfect knowledge of today. In his hands literature is a modeling vehicle, a flexible medium for developing socio-cultural hypotheses, an instrument of cognition and intellectual exploration'.¹⁵ His works have been 'couch[ed] in the guise of fictive metacommentaries, imaginary publications, allegorical and metaphorical fables, or even outright speculative treatises'.¹⁶ And in his later writings, he 'blur[s] the line between fiction and nonfiction, between imaginary events and imaginative renditions of real ones, between

10 For a more in-depth insight, see Liddell and Scott (1897), p.983, and meanings compiled for the μῦθος entry in Wiktionary at <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/μῦθος>

11 Knight (1991; 1995), p.472-3

12 All quotes from Turner, V. W. (1964) "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*" in Lessa and Vogt (1997; 1999), pp.234-243

13 Ziegfeld (1985), p.11

14 Swirski (1997), p.1

15 *ibid.*, p.16

16 *ibid.*, p.13

cognitive impulses behind fictive and factual writing.¹⁷

Artists are then the 'myth makers'¹⁸, as also in the words of British artist Grayson Perry. Art as myth creates meaning through introducing chaos and the realm of possibility. The creative act becomes the culmination of a reflective process of raising one's awareness, like a form of self-initiation where one is in flux as creator and audience, and which in turn generates (on purpose) what anthropologist Mary Douglas defines as 'matter out of place'¹⁹: a *polluting* element resulting in 'cognitive discomfort caused by ambiguity'²⁰ and that, as unfamiliar, alien and unexplainable, becomes risky and is at once created and perceived as dangerous. In Lem's own words: 'Therefore, one should seek out new terrains for creativity, those in which can be found a resistance that will lend an element of menace and risk ... to the situation.'²¹

Last year, preparing a conference lecture, I used Camus's essay *Create Dangerously*²² to make a point about how being 'engaged'²³ in the arts requires much more complex navigation than the categorical either/or of simply refusing art for art's sake and embracing direct activism. But it is only really now that I am grasping a deeper significance in his words. His was a call for artists to be liminal. The path he advocates is dangerous not only because it is not driven by familiar parameters and preoccupations, but also dangerous because it is not driving towards familiar ends and purposes. A path of initiation and transformation for oneself as well as for an external audience. A path dangerous not in its message or direction but dangerous because, in its very methodology, it is instigated by and instigating towards what Heidegger exalts as the 'dark errancy of questioning'²⁴.

Going back to the very beginning, I did not know at the time that I would come to recognise and accept that very first essay as my first *art*. It is also interesting that even etymologically the word *art* should be founded on the concept of fitting things together²⁵ as, of course, is the word *text*²⁶, linked to the weaving of warp and weft in textiles. In the light of what I have discussed above, it should also not come as a surprise that this art/text, while carrying a meandering thread seeking to create and establish meaning, should also generate so many more questions, so much chaos.

Or should I perhaps better say *entropy*? Positing a world where one is both author and reader, inextricably linked through the creative act, is to posit a constantly generative nomadic and rhizomatic²⁷ feedback of thinking and questioning: an oxymoron, perhaps, and yet a self-sustaining system, non-linear and pluri-dimensional, vibrating with resilience in all its increasing and unpredictable possibilities.

Hannah Arendt spent an enormous amount of effort delving into the importance, possibilities and implications of thinking and questioning. In *The Life of the Mind* she makes a stand for 'thinking as an activity'²⁸, picking up where she felt Kant had left off when he had freed thinking from

17 *ibid.*, p.13

18 Perry, exhibition label 'I am the Myth Maker', glazed ceramic (1989), in Jones and Stephens (eds.) (2020), p.139

19 Douglas (1966; 2002), p.44

20 *ibid.*, p.xi

21 Lem (1971; 1991)

22 Camus (1950; 2018)

23 Intended as in Sartre's *What Is Literature?* (1949)

24 Heidegger (1989), p.340

25 See Online Etymology Dictionary at <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=art>

26 See Online Etymology Dictionary at <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=text>

27 Deleuze and Guattari (1980; 1987)

28 Arendt (1971; 1978), p.15

cognition. A thinking separated from knowledge is not burdened by the end product of absolute answers or truths, and is instead '*inspired ... by the quest for meaning*'.¹²⁹ It is a thinking that 'does not think something but *about* something'¹³⁰ without, in Heidegger's words, 'the obsession with ends [which] confuses the clarity of the awe'.³¹

Thinking is then not just 'critical because it goes through this questioning and answering process'¹³² but is also a 'true activity' because it is reflective and therefore 'dialectical': it is enacted through a 'silent dialogue'¹³³ in which 'I am both the one who asks and the one who answers.'¹³⁴ This state of dialectical flux is also one of the ways in which the act of thinking is liminal, existing as it does, in Arendt's words, in the 'intramural warfare between thought and common sense.'¹³⁵ In a beautiful passage, she explains:

'thinking, is "out of order" [quoting Heidegger] not merely because it stops all the other activities ... but because it inverts all ordinary relationships: what is near and appears directly to our senses is now far away and what is distant is actually present. While thinking I am not where I actually am. I am surrounded ... by images that are invisible to everybody else. ... Thinking annihilates temporal as well as spatial distances ... but also time and space themselves. ... The faculty of anticipating the future in thought derives from the faculty of remembering the past, which in turns derives from the even more elementary ability to de-sense and have present *before* (and not just *in*) your mind what is physically absent.'¹³⁶

Thinking is also an action because, despite being 'not the prerogative of the few but an ever-present faculty in everybody', it needs to be actively engaged by choice: 'the inability to think is not a failing of the many who lack brain power but an ever-present possibility for everybody'. It is everybody's existential responsibility, as intended by Sartre, to sustain it by choosing, every day, not 'to shun that intercourse with oneself'.³⁷ Curiously, Lem did not have much time for Sartre (or Heidegger or phenomenology for all that matter)³⁸, champion as he was for his vision of the scientific project. And yet his writings have been seen, a feeling I fully second, to be pervaded by an existential and phenomenological drive³⁹. Thinking is, to combine some of Lem's own words, a 'Nothingness'⁴⁰ – a 'Perfect Vacuum' of 'Imaginary Magnitude'⁴¹ from which we continuously have to engage to find the way to create something other.

Lem's Solarian project had failed precisely not for lack of brain power but because it sought a final knowledge, accumulating libraries of information. Computers could not keep up with the ocean while the humans behind them failed to think about the possibilities of meaning. *Solaris*'s protagonist Kelvin grasps this when he finally realises that, in order to communicate with the silent ocean, it is first the silent self which he has to learn to engage with, as *personified* by Rheya. This creature, in her embodiment, also makes the thinking dialogue so much more a *visible* act. As, indeed, do Klapaucius and Trurl, whose not-so-silent constant banter with each other in *The*

29 *ibid.*, p.15

30 *ibid.*, p.187

31 Heidegger (1976; 1998), "Postscript to 'What Is Metaphysics?'" , p.237

32 Arendt (1971; 1978), p.185

33 *ibid.*, p.187

34 *ibid.*, p.185

35 *ibid.*, p.80

36 *ibid.*, pp.85-6

37 *ibid.*, p.191

38 Swirski, (1997), pp.63-4

39 Ziegfeld (1985), p.58

40 Lem (1981; 1991), pp.8-9

41 Lem (1971; 1991) and (1981; 1991)

Cyberiad is not difficult to be read as a manifestation of what Arendt calls the 'two-in-one'.⁴² And, notwithstanding Lem's reluctance to engage with Heidegger, *Solaris* can be read as a stark reflection on why the epistemological matter of the modern human thirst for absolute facts is ultimately dependent on the investigation of an ontological one: we do not exist to pursue external answers as objects to be conquered, but to seek meaning in a daily internal dialogue whose only fruits are the very fact that we can engage with it.

KELVIN "The experiment will go on, and anything can happen... "

RHEYA "Or nothing."

KELVIN "Or nothing. And I have to confess that nothing is what I would prefer. Not because I am frightened... but because there can't be any final outcome."⁴³

For Arendt, thinking is 'the ceaseless and restless activity of questioning', its value being that it 'constantly returns to question again and again the meaning we give to experiences, actions and circumstances.'⁴⁴ '[T]he business of thinking is like Penelope's web; it undoes every morning what it has finished the night before. For the need to think ... can be satisfied only through thinking'⁴⁵. Thinking as such 'can never be stilled'⁴⁶ by the acquisition of information and, through the chaos of generating unanswered and unanswerable questions, it is instead the energy that maintains its own entropy.

The personal responsibility for thinking, however, Arendt says, does not stop with the individual realm. The dialogue with oneself indeed drives the individual to agree with oneself in order to justify oneself. So a thinking individual develops a so-called 'conscience' primarily to be able to live with oneself, in 'fear' of 'the anticipation of the presence of a witness who awaits him only *if* and when he goes home.' On the contrary, the non-thinking individual is the one who 'will never be either able or willing to account for what he says or does'. But this *con-science*, this *knowing within*, in itself 'does not create values' because it does not create 'accepted rules of conduct.' It is its liminality that brings thinking into the political realm. The finitude dictated by our own mortality 'forces [one] to take account of a past when [one] was not yet and a future when [one] shall be no more.' It is in this "'boundary situation'" that the individual is forced to 'transcend the limits of [one's] own life' because history – as the time (and I would argue the space too) one has lived, lives and will live – is grasped as always shared. And it is here that 'thinking ceases to be a politically marginal activity' as it 'brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them', liberating, Arendt concludes, the faculty of 'judgment ... the most political of man's mental abilities.'⁴⁷

And so thinking, in its ability to give life to judgment, transposes the self-awareness deriving from our internal dialogue into an awareness and a dialogue with others, where our criticality has to be confronted, and then practised and maintained, not only individually but collectively.⁴⁸ The tragedy of Lem's Golem character does not reside in the awareness that 'Intelligence, if it is Intelligence – in other words, if it is able to question its own basis – must go beyond itself'⁴⁹, constantly transcending both itself and its individuality. His tragedy resides in the solitude of the

42 Arendt (1971; 1978), p.185

43 Lem (1961; 2003), p.152

44 Yar, "Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)", section 7: "Thinking and Judging"

45 Arendt (1971; 1978), p.88

46 *ibid.*, p.62, 88

47 *ibid.*, pp.190-3

48 See also Yar, "Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)", section 6: "Eichmann and the 'Banality of Evil' for Arendt's account on the failure 'to exercise one's 'capacity of thinking'"

49 Lem (1981; 1991), pp.134-5

inability to share the experience collectively in the *polis* in which, as an Intelligence – a word which, in its own etymology, acknowledges its liminality, literally *reading, collecting, gathering in between*⁵⁰ – Golem exists.

Thinking in this sense behaves in a mythopoetic way, generative in its meaning-seeking and value-creating liminality. And, as a child, it needs to be born – carried, delivered and initiated both as a responsibility and as an act – and then renewed, continually transformed, by choice, so that in turn it can also find the momentum for its own collective propagation. Thinking, as generative practice, is then a creative act that is performed, exercised and practiced individually as part of, as much as in view of, a collectivity.

And so, art as thinking-for-thinking's-sake is not an art-for-art's-sake but an art for existence's sake. Art so intended is not a means to an end to seek answers in the form of knowledge or to solve problems. It is a way of bringing them forth, of revealing their presence. Ziegfeld says of Lem that his 'approach to life [is] one which drives him to explore problems that might not yield solutions and then to insist that writers be honest about reporting their continuing inability to discover solutions'. He also says that this approach 'makes him a difficult taskmaster – for himself and for others in the literary community'⁵¹ and, I add, for an audience seeking ultimate satisfaction in the absolute and in the conclusive.

To say that art should not engage in trying to solve problems may seem thoughtless, even contemptuous and spilling into the realm of *hubris* in an age of continued upheaval. And yet Hannah Arendt herself came to this very conclusion in her investigations about thinking as a result of her analysis of the horrors of the first half of the 20th century. Art is not, to paraphrase Golem's words, the philosopher solving problems by creating locks that fit their existing key, nor the genius solving problems by opening multiple and seemingly inaccessible (to the common person) locks with a 'versatile' key through their innate 'combinational power of [their] intuition'⁵². Art is the acquired and exercised practice to imagine altogether new and even actually unopenable locks. Heidegger ominously impresses upon us that '[o]nly because we can question and ground things is the destiny of our existence placed in the hands of the researcher'⁵³, not in its elitist, exclusive, sense of the scholar or scientist, but as the one who searches. And, as Grayson Perry says: 'An artist should be searching.'⁵⁴

Art as thinking is an antidote to the uncritical acceptance of quick, or socially constructed or mass-derived answers and solutions. Art, as thinking, is then both method as well as a process to see to the fulfilment of the Heideggerian project in which "logic" itself disintegrates in the turbulence of a more originary questioning.⁵⁵ This is what Lem sees as the path of his writing:

'If you look at my works, the search for unknown mysterious mechanisms is a predominant part of what I write about. In general, both my fiction and nonfiction suggest that we can indeed travel quite far on the road to knowledge, but that in place of questions for which we find answers, others, like flowers, will spring along the way. And this is the way it is always going to be.'⁵⁶

50 See Online Etymology Dictionary at <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=intelligence>

51 Ziegfeld (1985), p.10

52 Lem (1981; 1991), pp.189, 192

53 Heidegger (1976; 1998), "What is Metaphysics?" pp.95-6

54 Jones and Stephens (eds.) (2020), p.31

55 Heidegger (1976; 1998), "What is Metaphysics?", p.92

56 Swirski (1997), pp.45-6

And so, going back to that early dissertation, I had at least managed to reach the realisation that reducing my line of enquiry about what art and being an artist were to ingredients for a recipe had been totally irrelevant. Still, it took three more years of self study and research to understand that (my) art was not the *things* I made but its *methodology*, that is, the way I chose to pursue the process of thinking as reflecting and questioning. And all the components of my work that I had felt were disjointed forms of branching out suddenly acquired meaning as manifestations of that process: not only writing, mentoring, curating, teaching, but personal research in the widest sense and covering all aspects of life. As Lem himself said of literature, art is not a product, an 'intellectual good'⁵⁷. What I had come to recognise, as Grayson Perry has beautifully said of his own discovery, is that 'being an artist was not a job, not something that you do and then switch off... – it is who you are.'⁵⁸

Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk articulates this 'training that ma[kes] it possible to do art and the asceticism that shape[s] artists'⁵⁹ as 'the life of practice'⁶⁰, as something that transcends the dichotomy of thinking and action and brings them together to reflect the 'substantial complex of human behavior'⁶¹. This '*askesis*'⁶² – deriving from Ancient Greek *askein*, meaning not only 'to exercise' or 'to train' but also 'to work curiously, to form by art'⁶³ – he calls 'Wisdom as a Practice'⁶⁴.

'Practice, or exercise, is the oldest form of self-referential training with the most momentous consequences. Its results do not influence external circumstances or objects, as in the labor or production process: they develop the practicing person himself and get him "into shape" as the subject-that-can.'⁶⁵

Both Arendt and Sloterdijk are of course simply at the more contemporary end of a long line of advocates of thinking as practice and as a way to teach oneself and each other about oneself, others and the world, which, of course only in a Western European context, became a more pressing concern with Socrates's *know thyself*. John Dewey and Antonio Gramsci contributed to the bringing of the transformational aspect of thinking, especially embodied and experienced, to the intersection of the pedagogical and the political, stressing the possibilities offered by the development of a sense of a critical agency, and the emancipation that this can bring to the individual alone and as part of a collectivity.⁶⁶

And it is through these eyes that we should read Joseph Beuys's words that

'"*Every human being is an artist!*" called upon to engage in the shaping of their lives and the world around them', 'in a thinking, speaking and listening process *with others*, that is, in fact, a living "social sculpture" ... in progress ... to inspire new insights, to make things happen, to inform and transform - in conversation, in work and daily life, in government, locally and

57 Lem (1981; 1991), p.61

58 Jones and Stephens (eds.) (2020), p.18

59 Sloterdijk (2010), p.9

60 *ibid.*, p.1

61 *ibid.*, p.6

62 *ibid.*, p.6-7

63 Liddell and Scott (1897), p.232

64 Sloterdijk (2010), title page

65 *ibid.*, p.6

66 Marziali (2017), chapter 3

globally.¹⁶⁷

In short, a process through which art is 'a method to exist in the world as individuals and as members of the wider society'¹⁶⁸, in which 'one's lifework becomes an artwork.'¹⁶⁹

And so, once again we go back to that very first essay and the question I had posed of being able, through reflective thinking, to be *author* and *reader*. Could the phenomenon I experienced of being revealed to myself as both creator and audience be observable in a much larger system? I had discovered that I could be an artist and audience within myself. Could I be an artist and an audience for others? And others for me? Entropy needs work. It needs energy to actually be sustained as entropy, as pure possibility, or it will eventually exhaust itself into a silent immutable order. It demands of both artists and audiences continuous reflective creative thinking. If art's 'most important role is to make meaning'¹⁷⁰, as Perry says quoting Arthur Danto, it also 'engages the audience to fill in the gaps'¹⁷¹ as much as the creator: it always 'needs people to keep asking it questions'.¹⁷²

Art is not active for a passive audience. Being an artist is not producing information. Being an audience is not understanding it. But art is also not truth, produced for an audience to believe. The reflective thinking creative act, in which there is no dichotomy of artist and audience, does not – must not – seek knowledge, but ceaselessly devote itself to *doubt* in order for its generative energy not to extinguish itself. Art-work is then different from any object-as-such in the way that 'it's all about frustrating our urgent need to double click our way to satisfaction..., to detain and suspend us in a state of frustration and ambivalence, and to make us pause and think rather than simply react.'¹⁷³

Art is the purveyor of chaos. It is the ultimate liminal act, pursuing creation to avoid destruction. It is pure directedness aimed at no particular direction. It is clarity aimed at doubt. It is energy spent trying to fit things together only in order to maintain entropy. If all possibilities are exhausted, all will fall silent, immobile and immutable. Art is then the effort of keeping adding to the fuel reserves of possibility. Not in order to maintain the conditions for our own Sisyphean transitory existence, but the conditions for Existence itself. And, as such, it cannot be but collective.

The creative act, as liminal, as reflective thinking, as myth-making and meaning-seeking, is, ontologically and epistemologically, a leap into a Nothingness filled only with the freedom of possibility. Bohm the philosopher scientist said that creativity needs to be 'discovered' through a 'difficult' process of awakening from one's 'comfortable state of somnolence'¹⁷⁴. In the same way, Lem the scientist philosopher tells us that for the audience to explore this Nothingness is also a 'difficult thing' which 'paralyzes the unready' and which 'cannot even be tasted without careful seasoning and spiritual exercises, without lengthy study and training'.¹⁷⁵ And so this act of 'overcoming the numbness and [of] enlivening of being'¹⁷⁶ is always a mutual process, within

67 Beuys (2004), p.2

68 Marziali (2017), chapter 3

69 Beuys (2004), p.2

70 Perry (2014; 2016), p.111

71 *ibid.*, p.58

72 *ibid.*, p.2

73 *ibid.*, pp.70-1

74 Bohm (1996; 2004), see especially pp.1-32

75 Lem (1981; 1991), p.9

76 Shelly Sacks on Joseph Beuys in Beuys (2004), p.x

ourselves and in our collectivity: the 'question about what can and is trying to emerge' is always a 'shared' process of 'listening and action'.⁷⁷

And so, on to more and pressing questions. How many of us are making the critical effort of (self-)reflection and (self-)study, *initiating* ourselves and each other for the task at hand? And in these times of combined hyper-information and hyper-alienation, how much are we just feeding our inflated needs for hyper-participation, hyper-visibility, hyper-connectivity and hyper-appreciation? Often at the cost of the quality of what we have to say?

As artists and audiences, how can we prepare ourselves, and then exercise and practise our collective responsibility of thinking? Of (self-)curatorship – intended in its etymological sense of *cura/care* belonging to an individual sphere inextricably linked to the public one? Of raising our own and each other's critical skills in our private as well as shared spaces, from the macrocosmos of the global art world to the microcosmos of our own studio output and even social media feeds? Of avoiding what Orwell scathingly challenged as 'intellectual cowardice'⁷⁸ and what Lem, himself very aware and very vocal about a persisting 'intellectual and spiritual crisis'⁷⁹, calls 'a complete leveling out of cultural ... evaluative efforts ... feedback-linked to inflationary trends'? Of 'capping ... the continuous outpouring'⁸⁰ of work, while at the same time striving for mutual and egalitarian inclusivity and ensuring that voices are represented and heard?

'Thinking is a deed ... [which] permeates action and production, not through the grandeur of its achievement and not as a consequence of its effect, but through the humbleness of its inconsequential accomplishment', says again Heidegger. But to me this kind of thinking does not, as he says, surpass all *praxis*⁸¹: reflective, creative, (self-)sustaining thinking *is* praxis. When we embrace our collective thinking and questioning as praxis, as in Sloterdijk's *wisdom as a practice*, we are never just artists or just audiences, but always both. This requires of us a double effort in our critical preparedness. As Lem biting puts it: 'It is possible, of course, with a book to rearrange the furniture inside a reader's head, but only to the extent that there is some furniture there already, before the reading.'⁸²

The struggle in the existential project of being a reflective thinking artist/audience – as Beuys says, 'to keep preparing [ourselves] throughout [our] life, conducting [ourselves] in such a way that no single moment is not given to this preparation'⁸³ – is now more tangible than it's ever been. That is why I felt it was crucial that, in these reflections, I should never lose sight of the autobiographical and the very personal: of where I stand, of my own preparedness as a single yet indispensable element of a necessarily collective *polis*. This is where we all start.

As artists we are the myth makers and to be an artist is to be a 'pilgrim on the road to meaning.'⁸⁴ As reflective thinkers, as always both artists and audiences in and for ourselves and in and for our *polis*, we have a shared agency in meaning-making and value-making – in terms of both our capacity and potential, and oh-so-importantly of the choices we make. And this agency comes, now more than ever, with immense responsibility 'not as a moral imperative, but [as] response-

77 Volker Harlan, describing exercises carried out with Joseph Beuys in Beuys (2004), p.7

78 Orwell (1945; 1995), p.162

79 Ziegfeld (1985), p.117

80 Swirski (1997), p.9

81 Heidegger 'Letter on "Humanism"' (1976; 1998), p.274

82 Lem (1971; 1991), p.71

83 Beuys (2004), p.12

84 Perry (2014; 2016), p.125

ability, or the ability to respond' – as Beuys envisaged in his 'expanded definition of “material”' and 'expanded conception of art or “social sculpture”'⁸⁵: shaping our thinking, shaping ourselves and others and thus shaping the world we share.

'[T]he fundamental research into art and its function ... [needs to be] resolved in a truly radical way that actually sees art as the starting point for producing anything at all, in every field of work. ... This idea – that it is from art that all work ensues – needs to be borne in mind, if we want to reshape and re-form society ... [to] lead to a truly holistic development of the world'⁸⁶, [so that] 'we experience a view of holism that ... opens up a genuine understanding of the relationship between humans, nature and the cosmos and the interconnections between expanded art practice and ... work towards a free, democratic and sustainable future.'⁸⁷

The question is: Am I up to the challenge? Are we all up to the challenge?

And more importantly, how *prepared* are we for it?

Lieta Marziali, March 2022

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85 Shelley Sacks in Beuys (2004), p.ix-x

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87 Shelley Sacks in Beuys (2004), p.xi

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