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GIVING AND TAKING

ANTIDOTES TO A CULTURE OF GREED

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giving and taking
antidotes to a culture of greed

In current discussions and politics around contemporary art, the consensus is that artists should be fully autonomous, as they have always claimed to be. Artists can test their value through the success or failure of their products on the art market, in the art world, in art discourse and in the media. But why is art made in the first place? What makes us want to create and enjoy or hate new art time and time again? What is this demiurgic drive, this will to create and to make what didn't exist before?

Durkheim stated that an economy could only thrive on the basis of an often unspoken solidarity between the participants. Markets and money are crude measures when it comes to establishing the value of art and feeling, and to the whole field of exploring, failing, inventing and succeeding known as contemporary art. What exactly is valued in the financial approach to art, and what is overlooked?

This book is a collective effort to establish the significance of so-called non-pecuniary values in art and society, in the broadest sense of the terms. What is art about and after? Here, we examine a layer of solidarity between the participants in our world economy that nobody seems to address anymore, obsessed and blinded as we are by the strictly formal axiomatics of money – the layer of love and enthusiasm from which all art springs.

The willingness of people to freely provide social media companies like Google and Facebook with free content shows that the solidarity-interest complex is still functioning even within the barrenness of our neoliberal times. Under a thin layer of consumerism lies an ocean of generosity. The content of the technological medium known as "social media" is the pretechnological medium of "the gift." Ceremonial gift exchange is the model art still uses to produce living value, as opposed to a money economy that acknowledges only abstract pecuniary value.

But what is this living reserve – this free-for-all only entered by some, which we call art, which is characterized by continuous experimentation, testing and provision of a channel for – well, what exactly? Solidarity? Truth, Beauty, Goodness? This is where our quest starts; this question informs all the contributions in this book.

Method

If we need an answer to the question of where the real value lies in society and in art – and we do, urgently – why not ask philosophers, anthropologists, aestheticians, sociologists and others who have shown themselves to be pursuing the same quest? The problems facing us in the 21st century, as we move towards "peak humanity" with a world population of 12 billion by 2072, are mind-boggling and nerve-racking. Global warming is only the beginning of the ecological devastation that will leave us with a world of dead Zen gardens everywhere. What are we doing, and why aren't we doing it better?

When two or more artists or writers work on a single piece together, after an initial phase full of conflict and misunderstanding, a phenomenon sometimes comes about that William Burroughs and Brion Gysin famously called *The Third Mind*. Whatever the participants' subject is, the method that unites them takes on a voice of its own and spills new ideas into a tentative conversation.

We don't claim that any of the answers or methods provided by the authors in this book mirror our position in the ongoing debate aimed at formulating a discourse on art that goes beyond the neoliberal certainties and blinkers. Our position is that of an open-mindedness that does not want to be lured into a single train of thought but rather to move through a network of discourses in order to find the way out towards, or maybe back into, a society that is not predatory, parasitic or bluntly indifferent to what it destroys but lives by the standards and values that art is and has always been all about.

To the contributors to this book, we said: Imagine you're allowed to speak for your entire discipline. Don't worry about being interdisciplinary – the third mind of this book project will take care of that. We want you to give us your vision and understanding of what goes beyond pecuniary and other measurable values in your area of the arts and sciences. What are we trying to achieve and

use, to guard and develop, when we say we're on the side of the non-pecuniary, of the solidarity of difference, of that absolute that art makes us aware of?

Joke Brouwer
Sjoerd van Tuinen

German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (b. 1947) has controversially celebrated wealth and property as the source of an ethos of generosity and creativity opposed to the "miserabilistic International" that suppresses the truth of its own prosperity. Sloterdijk is best known for his debut, "Critique of Cynical Reason" (1983), and more recently for his "Spheres" trilogy (1998, 1999, 2004). Influenced first of all by the "glad tidings" of Friedrich Nietzsche, he takes as one of his leading themes the relief of guilt. In his early work, this takes the form of "kynicism": discursive and nondiscursive performances of parrhesiastic cheekiness that function as immune strategies against omnipresent cynicism, i.e., the moralizing split between thinking and doing which puts "ressentiment" and bad conscience at the core of late capitalist culture. More recently, "thymos" or "stout-heartedness" is the basic affect by which Sloterdijk explores alternative modes of valuation and citizenship. Throughout, his aim is a philosophical "retuning" of today's all-pervasive "dissimulation of lack," due to which modern emancipation has degenerated into religious, political and economical routines of compensation.

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what does a human have that he can give away?

An Interview with Peter Sloterdijk by Sjoerd van Tuinen

SvT: The topic of our conversation is generosity. In your recent books you have developed something like an ethics of generosity. Would you agree?

PS: Yes, that's true, in *Sphären III: Schäume* as well as in *Die nehmende Hand und die gebende Seite* (The taking hand and the giving side), a book that was published in French under the slightly more appropriate title of *Repenser l'impôt* (Rethinking taxation). Yes, it is one of the topics driving my work over the last few years.

In my view, you're one of the last representatives of the great German tradition of philosophical anthropology, perpetuated by the likes of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen. At the same time, one could also place you within a more sociological tradition. I'm thinking here of Paris's College de Sociologie, referring particularly to Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois. This is a tradition that puts more emphasis on social relations and contexts than it does on the individual or the species. In this combination of philosophical anthropology and sociology, and particularly with reference to your ethics of generosity, I think you're following the approach Marcel Mauss developed in his classic essay on the gift. Mauss derives the social synthesis from the gift and does not fail to formulate a number of important lessons for our present times. How would you describe your relationship to Marcel Mauss and his tradition?

I must admit that I'd love to be an affirmative Maussian. In fact, if there were something like a proper Mauss school of thought, I would count myself in. There is indeed in France now a research group of younger sociologists who are being noticed and who have funded a Marcel Mauss research center. Yet in terms of his reception, Mauss is a tragic case, insofar as he has always been exclusively read as an ethnologist rather than an ethicist. An ethicist is someone who writes anthropology for his contemporaries. In other words, he tries to remind the human being of his or her humanity by assigning certain qualities to him or her. This act is not one of innocent anthropological description, as the human being is supposed to take on these qualities through the act of description. Unfortunately, Mauss has been exclusively understood as an ethnologist, a specialist in archaic societies. His discourse on the gift has been considered as a description of so-called primitive societies, without recognition of the message that the modern world could not function without a second economy, i.e., gift circulation. It is with good reason that the modern world has been described as an age in which exchange – more precisely, money-mediated exchange – has replaced its other, older version, gift exchange. According to this interpretation, the introduction of money has led to the disappearance of the gift. The truth is, though, that only one half of the relations of exchange could be integrated into the world of money; the other half still depends on an alternative mode of circulation, one that takes place partly as forced circulation. The so-called tax or duty, the *impôt*, which people have been forced to pay since the beginning of the modern state, is in fact the continuation of the gift by other means. And this is a very interesting and never properly understood issue that requires the help of Mauss if one wants to work through the jungle of ambivalences that comes with it. Mauss is the first and only thinker to date who understood that in the gift, the principle of voluntariness does not cancel out the principle of necessity or obligation. In other words, the gift , like Christ, has a double nature, i.e., it includes both an element of voluntariness and an element of coercion. This is why I argued some time ago that, as citizens of modern political structures, we won't escape our misconception of taxation unless we regard taxes as gift instead of a citizen's debt to the state. For a decade now, I've been wandering through the desert like John the Baptist spreading this thesis. I always say: My dear friends, taxes are not debts the citizen owes

to the state but gifts he has to give to the treasury. This is the curious thing: it is an obligatory gift. One can argue about this notion as long as one likes, but my thesis is this: if we continue to take the notion of debt as our point of departure, we won't understand the essence of taxation and will also stay light years away from the great intuition Marcel Mauss developed in his book on the gift. To which I would like to add that Mauss was a socialist; we shouldn't forget that. He was a socialist who in his own way tried to think a society of generosity, which is to say a socialism without ressentiment. In my opinion, however, the idea of giving the left an ethical injection that would liberate it from a politics of ressentiment and move it to a politics of generosity remains a dream.

> *I wonder if today tax is the only form of the gift. I mean, if one half of the theory of ceremonial exchange has been incorporated into the money economy, where do I situate the everyday gift-giving that people do when they invite each other over for dinner or bring flowers on a date?*

All this belongs to the other half. However, the enormousness of the tax process is by virtue of its sheer numerical volume certainly the central phenomenon here. Having said that, there is also a sizable charity economy. At the University of Indiana in the US, they have an institution called the Center on Philanthropy,[1] where annual statistics are compiled about the charitable activities of Americans in particular but also of other populations throughout the world. I've just seen numbers showing that in 2008 the Americans gave $307.7 billion to charity on top of their normal fiscal obligations. Only a part of this amount is deductible. American fiscal law is rather generous here, allowing for a considerable flow of money from the tax office to philanthropic institutions. This is interesting insofar as philanthropic money tends to be intelligent money, meaning it's dedicated to a particular purpose. It doesn't flow through the treasury, where it's without dedication and purpose and thus a purely disposable quantity. Philanthropic money is usually smart money, "addressed" money, and it is probably of greater use to the community than money that reaches it through fiscal redistribution. In other words, its efficiency factor is higher in the same way that one talks about efficiency factors in heating. An open

fireplace, for instance, has probably an efficiency factor of five to ten percent. A good Norwegian cast iron stove has already got an efficiency factor of fifty percent. Floor heating gets it up to eighty per cent. This applies to money as well. The efficiency of money is dramatically lowered as soon as the state gets its hands on it, because then money doesn't work in terms of investment anymore. American civil society has this great talent of people taking care of themselves, which is something that comes out of the spirit of its founding years 200 years ago and is still very much alive.

> *What about, for exemple, the whole anti-abortion movement, then? It's sponsored according to this model, but I don't think one would necessarily call it "intelligent."*

Yes, of course, there is quite a bit of ambivalence in this story as well. Yet it has to be said that this is an enviable feature of American culture. Then again, we could also take a closer look at our own situation. In Germany, for instance, there are 17,000 foundations. This is remarkable, since Germany, alongside France, is the most statist nation on earth – there's no comparison to the anarchism of the Italians or the Greeks or the southern Europeans in general. These foundations turn over significant amounts of money. Without their activities, areas such as culture, sports and health care wouldn't be able to function. This is a very broad and dispersed field no sociologist has ever looked at. They've learned their analytical categories from the classics, and there's no mention of the gift there. In this respect, Marcel Mauss remains the only beacon in the dark night of theory.

> *Couldn't one also refer to Durkheim to argue that a money economy can't function without basic solidarity?*

True, society itself needs a collective imaginary as an institution where people can generate family metaphors among themselves. Castoriadis and others have worked in this direction. Here in Germany, it was the subject matter of the work of the forgotten yet, in my eyes, enormously important sociologist Dieter Claessens. He wrote a book in 1980, *Das Konkrete und das Abstrakte* (The concrete and the abstract), attempting a kind of sociological anthropology, starting with the question of how sizeable social

bodies can be integrated at all, particularly in a state of social evolution where a people's assembly isn't an option anymore. In other words, what happens when it's solely left to symbolic mechanisms and phantasms to generate a sense of solidarity among people. He offers an incredibly profound and precise analysis of this question. One should actually reread this book every three years to remind oneself of the theoretical inroads he was able to make even then. Today, theory seems to be in a bit of a regression regarding this question. This has also to do with the fact that today we tend to express these matters in the language of media theory and don't use his metaphors of social synthesis anymore, which were almost always metamorphoses of a family feeling. His terminology was one that tried to visualize the abstract, greater social context by using images that were close to personal experience. Obviously, there was always a danger of confusing community and society, with the fatal political consequences that manifested in the twentieth century.

I would like to ask two questions in this regard. As a theorist and anthropologist of primitive communities, Mauss mainly describes communities where ceremonial gift exchange actually works. As soon as one moves from communities to societies, it doesn't really work anymore. Hence the question: to what extent is it possible at all to redefine the idea of the gift on this new scale, and what role would the media play in this?

The second question I would like to add right away is this. Marcel Hénaff shows that whenever societies grow too large for the gift to function, a new principle of giving emerges, namely that of "charis: grâce"; i.e., the act of grace. This is a gift that no longer circulates horizontally but moves vertically and unilaterally, as it is given by a transcendental authority, be it God or the state or a despot. In essence, "charis" is an unconditional gift. It seems to me that the idea of an unconditional gift is becoming more important for our societies. If this is true, don't we need to take a fresh look at our fiscal system? Not only from the perspective of the taxpayer or "tax giver" but also in terms of analyzing the idea of an authority that administers unconditional gifts?

I am rather skeptical when it comes to the idea of an unconditional gift. I spent quite a long time looking into what Derrida had to say on this issue, and I believe that this idea is the metaphysical Trojan horse of modern sociology. One simply asks too much of the gift if one ties it to unconditionality, thus situating it firmly in the sphere of altruism. Derrida puts this in very interesting ways. He says the best gift is one about which the giver doesn't know he has made it, and therefore the taking side remains free of any obligation towards the giving side, et cetera. To me, this seems an inappropriate turn toward idealism. As I said, this is the Trojan horse of metaphysics returning to contemporary sociology through the gate of gift theory. What's wrong with the expectation of reciprocity somehow resonating in the gift? Every gift implies the structure of exchange anyway; the question is what would happen if the *relation* between gift and countergift were to remain completely open. We need to understand that such a return on investment would involve a return movement much more extensive than that of taking something from a shop in exchange for a banknote. In the latter case, the symmetry is synchronous; gift and countergift are directly linked to one another, hence the price of the good. However, there are many things that don't have a price, yet they need to be supported, need to be paid for. In these cases, a much greater return is expected but postponed into the next generation or perhaps even five generations later. Not understanding this means that one is a really sorry human being.

Do we have the ability at all to think in terms of such a bigger picture?

It was easier in the past, because some people were lucky enough to live long enough to, for instance, watch their grandchildren grow up. That is to say, they could observe how the sacrifices they had made for the sake of the children were repeated by them with regard to their children and so on. A true patriarch could use a telescope to see the fourth generation and thus get a sense that the great chain of life continued and that his expenditure had not been in vain.

The chain usually breaks with the third generation, as Thomas Mann's "Buddenbrooks" teaches us.

Yes, in the end you have a son who is only an artist, and with him comes the ruin. However, the problem of decadence today is no longer that of a Buddenbrook family. The problem of decadence today is the problem of an individual existence unable to make any biological or spiritual long-term investments. Which is why it is so interesting that there are more and more people trying to stabilize their life achievements by setting up foundations. I mentioned the 17,000 foundations we have in Germany and how essential their support has become for countless social institutions.

Right. Bill Gates's children get a bit of his fortune, enough to get by but not enough to avoid having to work. The rest is passed on not to the family dynasty but to foundations.

Indeed. Since Thomas Jefferson, there has been the strange ideology in the US, still influential among many American charity personalities, that each generation forms its own nation. This led Andrew Carnegie – who was one of the American steel industry's tough guys and, in his virulent years, not exactly a nice guy – to bequeath nothing to his children. He said every generation needed a fresh start. This is almost a quote from the famous letter Jefferson wrote in 1813 to his former son-in-law, John W. Eppes, where he says we have to regard each generation as a different and independent nation with the right to bind itself by certain laws but not to bind the following generation – that's going to be its own business. It's a very interesting approach, an interesting ideology. Go back to start! Just like Monopoly.

Yet in Monopoly, one gets a big unconditional gift off the anonymous bank. How could this whole idea of gifts be mediated today? Foundations are important, of course, but what else?

I think the bottom line is to make taxation intelligent. That's the point, really. We're living in a taxation culture that is no longer adequate to the state of our collective consciousness. Most people know better than the

minister of finance what they'd want to spend their money on. In addition, the state has become an enormous junkie, thanks to its addiction to fiscal processes. In Germany, we've got five million employees working in public services. The state is the largest employer, and it obviously takes care of its own when it comes to redistribution. It's an incredible dissipation machine, a gigantic self-service machine, an apparatus of monstrous proportions transforming potentially intelligent money into stupid, silly money. Smart tax management would do a lot. If citizens were allowed to invest a part of their general tax burden directly in a school, a university, a training center, a hospital or a similar public institution, we would have much less frictional loss.

From reading your work, one gets the impression that this intelligence would require a very different value system as well. You already spoke of spiritual investments: if I transfer my money directly to the university, I make an investment in intelligence, in something spiritual that's different from the day-to-day economy of consumption.

That's right; it would imply a radically changed communal consciousness. This is hard to achieve today, as we're practicing a form of mass culture that destroys such a consciousness through vulgarization and egoism propaganda on a daily basis. There's probably no way around this in consumer societies. Today, the individual is first and foremost a consumer, not a citizen. We're only indirect members of the polity when we fulfill our duties of consumption, and that's why the most subversive people today are anti-consumerists. They're not very popular, though. We just had proof of this in Germany. The Green party suggested introducing a vegetarian day in Germany's public cafeterias, which almost led to their ejection from the Bundestag. They lost a lot of votes in the parliamentary elections, not least because they were accused of dictatorially interfering with people's way of life – a pretty absurd reproach if you ask me.

In your understanding, what sort of values should be encouraged or developed in order to facilitate a transformation?

In my opinion, modern ethics is too erotic and not thymotic enough. This is my basic standpoint regarding this topic. Unfortunately, we have transformed the human being into a *zoon eroticon*. This is the way we define it. We've learned from Plato that Eros is a demigod who only helps people who lack something, who are hunting for an object of lack. A thymotic ethics, on the other hand, would take a different question as its point of departure: what does a human being have that he can give away? The erotic economy is not just driven by money but by lack. It works through lack and fictions thereof. If there is no lack, it invents it in order to go on. The thymotic economy describes human beings as creatures who want to give instead of take. Thymotic economies understand the human as someone with a deep propensity to give; this is something one can observe in children, who are just as happy giving presents as they are receiving them. Parents can experience this very touching fact if they pay enough attention to their children's early moral operations.

> *What would a thymotic economy look like? Let's take a concrete example: art. It seems to me that avant-garde artists are real thymoticians. They accept a very basic life in order to make a meaningful gesture, a gift that could not be derived from a lack-driven, erotic economy. However, in times of austerity, the state is cutting back on subsidies for art. The Dutch liberal-conservative government has cut its art budget by almost fifty percent. The message is: as an artist, you have to somehow make it on the market. What about that? What does a thymotically inspired artist have to do today? How could he or she survive in the market?*

It's very simple advice, isn't it? You have to be successful! I think this new Dutch version of cultural policy is the result of misconceptions. I'm not exactly sure what the considerations were that led to the budget cuts. It could be that they were paying homage to the neoliberal ideology, according to which culture is mere luxury anyway. Yet the problem here is partly the inability of artists to present themselves as part of the social base. Perhaps they have indeed behaved a bit like luxury creatures in an artificial compound, making it easy for the austerity politicians to believe this is all dispensable luxury. One should remember the wonderful book by Simon

Schama about seventeenth-century Dutch culture, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, which describes a dilemma comparable to that of today's thymotic artists in Holland. Holland was the first country in the world without a properly poor population. What did they do? The preachers ascended the pulpit and tried to frighten the rich by telling them that a wealthy life as such is a road to perdition.

> *In contrast, Weber's classical thesis was that worldly economic success is a harbinger of a good afterlife.*

Well, I've never bought into Weber's thesis, because the money economy works quite differently from how he describes it. Besides, the connection between Protestantism and capitalism is not as close as he presents it. The early manufacturers in Flanders and the northern Italian cities already had a functioning money economy *before* the Reformation. And the inclination to get into debt was just as strong during and after the Reformation in Catholic countries as it was elsewhere. Spain, for instance, had to declare bankruptcy thrice under Philip II, and in the 1990s, almost half of its budget went into servicing its debt. Incredible, isn't it? So there are obviously certain historical constants. Yet with the Dutch, there's a subconscious feeling of guilt that takes hold of them as soon as too much luxury is consumed or, more importantly, produced. And art, of course, is the archetype of luxury production.

> *Nonetheless, artists in Holland were particularly active in their struggle against austerity policies, arguing that artists create different values; for instance, beauty. They also said: As artists, we're able to animate or reanimate different forms of community. Yet the argument didn't catch on.*

They'd have had to prove it, wouldn't they?

> *Does such proof necessarily have to come from the market?*

We've never had a successful general strike by artists or brain workers. That would be quite interesting: what would happen if the intellectuals, the artists

and the creative class of a major country went on strike and refused to animate anything? There'd only be journalists left: journalists and the police. And then we'd see how they got along on their own. That would be an interesting social experiment. We should at least once imagine, or perhaps even arrange, a general strike by brain workers in order to affirm my basic assumption that the symbolic air we breathe every day comes out of the creative class's symbolic production, and if it were neglected for just a few days, we'd find ourselves in the same situation as the mutants on Mars in Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall*. The entire atmosphere would be gone. After all, the symbolic atmosphere of society is one of its basic functions; this is something that should be emphasized in the Dutch discussion. For the rest, I can't really judge whether or not the budget cuts are sensible.

> *If I understand you correctly, you're suggesting that artists should strive for a culture of gift-giving. Without value creation, there is no atmosphere. You once said that intellectuals and artists were the last remaining proletarians: we're the only ones who still don't have free weekends and 9-to-5 workdays. However, when you talk about a general strike, you're not really talking about a labor movement. You're not advocating the emancipation of intellectuals. You're suggesting a movement of entrepreneurs. Now, the entrepreneurs you're referring to may not be the artists but rather those who are able to transfer their profits to foundations supporting the arts.*

If I'm referring to a movement of entrepreneurs, I actually do mean the entire creative class; artists are a part of it but perhaps not the most important one anymore.

> *This is the leitmotif of austerity policy: artists should become entrepreneurs.*

Because actually, our definition of the worker today is much closer to entrepreneurship than it is to the old image of the employee who goes to the factory in the morning and comes back home in the evening. This type of worker loomed large throughout the first half of the twentieth century but is now quickly disappearing. In Germany's new collective bargaining

law, the distinction between employee and worker has been abolished. Which is why I've recently suggested a minute of silence in the senate in honor of the lost working class.

Let's come back to the question of non-monetary value. Take Greece, for instance. In the European discussion of the debt crisis, besides the financial questions, there are strong theological overtones. For instance, one could ask: do we have to get everything back from the Greeks, or should we be more forgiving and relieve them of their debt? Are there perhaps theological values as well that could make a difference here?

Yes, there is a theology that applies to the situation the Greeks are in. Once there was a small population on an island somewhere in the Greek archipelago, which was defeated by the Athenians. When the Athenian delegation arrived on the island, the local people said: You live under the rule of the gods of wealth and power. We, however, live under the rule of the gods of deprivation and poverty, who'll protect us and prevent us from paying the tribute you're demanding. In other words, they developed a spontaneous allegorical theology on the spot, by saying: Our lack trumps your wealth, because we'll use it as a weapon against your tributary demands. In other words, you can't take from empty hands, even if you're much wealthier and more powerful than we are. This demonstrates how even 2,500 years ago, the Greeks were smart enough to use the sword of poverty against their own big heads.

But why didn't the wealthy and the powerful relieve them of their debt?

I don't know how the story ends. They simply lost interest in the poor devils.

I was actually thinking of Nietzsche's thesis in the second part of "On the Genealogy of Morals" that every powerful man, every gentleman, ruins himself by means of his own generosity.

Right. Norbert Elias, following Montesquieu, developed the same thesis in his studies of court society. Montesquieu was the first to describe a system of wealth rotation in France, where great houses rise and fall by the workings of a mechanism that Norbert Elias described very well in terms of prestige-rational behavior. Prestige-rational behavior implies the necessity of conspicuous extravagance as a show of – in Darwinian terms – fitness, which inevitably leads to an economy of exhaustion.

A potlatch.

That's Montesquieu's basic assumption, and also that of Norbert Elias in his book on the court society. Members of prestige-rational cultures act reasonably within the structure of their system by engaging in what Thorstein Veblen called conspicuous consumption, but they pay the price of obligatory self-ruin. Shakespeare has dealt with this issue as well. In *Timon of Athens,* he paints the picture of an aristocrat who's driven by his own generosity to give away his entire fortune. Then, when his moment of need arrives, he discovers there's no such thing as reciprocity, which leads to an outbreak of misanthropy in him. In other words, he discovers an enormous hatred for other people deep inside himself as he realizes there are no reciprocal relationships in Athens anymore. He was the only generous person; all the others excused themselves when he came to them – didn't have the money or had a funeral to pay for or were sick and so on. In other words, he was living in a society without countergifts. It's fantastic to read how Shakespeare presents Timon cursing the entire city. It's a long monologue in front of the city wall; he actually addresses it, saying: Don't protect this rotten city anymore; the sons should beat out their fathers' brains, and so on. He invokes a perverse world, because in fact it is already here. It's a fantastic story about a generous man's disappointed expectations of reciprocity.

Yet a thymotic economy isn't built on the principle of reciprocity either. There are always those who give and those who take and thus a certain hierarchy and aristocracy.

Indeed, there are two kinds of thymotic giving. There's an inter-aristocratic communication premised naturally on reciprocity. This is also Aristotle's basic assumption in Book IV of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, where he speaks of *megalopsychia*, meaning the generous, magnanimous constitution that, according to him, represents the condition of democracy, because he still believes in the city as a place where several kinds of noblesse compete with one another. We have the competition of the athletes, the competition of poets, the competition of the sponsors, the competition of the organizers of the games and the Dionysia. And there is the euergetic gift. Birger Priddat, a sociologist at Witten/Herdecke University, just published a beautiful article on the justification of wealth in the ancient and modern world that shows that the real justification of wealth in antiquity could only be found in the euergetic function. Euergetism is something that began with the Greeks and was continued by the Romans. Those who were rich had, for instance, to finance the games – the emperor was bound to put on big shows in the Circus Maximus several times a year, including the distribution of bread and wine and so on. Paul Veyne, in his book *Bread and Circuses*, describes the transformation of euergetism into Christian "good deeds." That is to say that in the ancient world, the justification of wealth was a generous act that could not, of course, be repaid but instead was translated into expressions of gratitude, of adoration and applause. And no more is needed in such a system, as inequality will continue to exist; the rich man passes on a good part of his wealth and is thus able to indirectly justify himself.

And of course there is another dimension as well: the inter-aristocratic transaction, where the rich give each other flowers. The Middle Ages had the tradition of state gifts. On the occasion of a state visit, you always had to bring a sack or a suitcase full of gold, because you couldn't present yourself to a fellow ruler empty-handed. We see this in historical movies, of costume dramas: whenever a king visits another king, a small gang of servants carrying a chest full of gold always comes with him. Once a French or English king supposedly brought two kilos of pepper on a visit to a neighboring king. At the time, that was in fact the real gold – black gold.

We've talked about artists, theology, aristocrats – what about philosophy? One of my favorite concepts in your work is the notion of

linguistic relief, which emerges early on in your writings, in the book of lectures "Zur Welt kommen – zur Sprache kommen." There, you speak of a "breath of relief," meaning an act of linguistic value creation, a symbolic injection into the public climate. And in "Über die Verbesserung der guten Nachricht" (On the improvement of good news), you actually suggest that good news depends on linguistic self-celebration. I believe a good description of your philosophy has to include linguistic generosity, or "megalopsychia." In the past, the Sophists have been described as those who are paid for their wisdom. You trade in knowledge and receive monetary compensation as a result of the great success of your books. Yet with regard to the thymotic element in your work, the medium of language is absolutely essential. The notion of "Freispruch" is interesting in this context as it also the German word for acquittal of guilt or debt. Could this notion be interpreted in moral terms as well?

It implies something else too, something that's related to the notion of *parrhesia*, which Michel Foucault talked about a lot in his later work. Men of antiquity entertained a sort of athletic, sportive notion of communication, driven by the idea that a human being is freest when communicating without second thoughts.

When communicating "sans réserve," to use Derrida's expression.

Exactly. And one doesn't hold back one's actual opinions when dealing with someone supposedly stronger, either. The most famous ancient *parrhesia* phrase is Diogenes of Sinope telling Alexander the Great, "Get out of my sun!" This is one component of the linguistic release you mentioned, the other one, of course, being the successful repudiation of guilt or the chronic suspicion thereof. Yet the basic attitude resonating in my writing is that of a feast I'm inviting my readers to, so I have to make sure there are interesting things on the table. I feel the obligation of a host vis-à-vis a guest who's visiting my book. I want my guests to take something home without burdening them too much. That's what I want to achieve.

What is the value of wisdom?

The value of wisdom is a self-multiplying quantity. It's a little bit like what Lacan has to say about love: you only get it by passing it on. One only has it as long as there's someone to give it to; it can't be owned.

What sort of countergift does it imply?

Well, actually, the act is self-rewarding. We know this from Goethe, from his famous poem "The Singer." The singer rewards himself by listening to his own song. Obviously, the case of the Three Tenors was different: they became millionaires on top of it. They made $100 million from one gala concert. All that money for a few high notes! Yet at the same time, if a singer is really good, you get the feeling they'd do it for free, because it's a self-rewarding performance.

What about beauty, then?

Beauty is a slightly different matter. One doesn't possess beauty; one can't even see it at all. In the natural order of things, a beautiful human being knows of his or her looks only through other people's reactions. Mirrors are a relatively new phenomenon. I think one of modernity's great delusions is the belief that our ancestors knew as much as we do about their appearance. We're surrounded by a system of mirrors, to which one has to add the infernal machine of photography. In the past, most people were only able to look out of their faces, not back into them. They were told by other people's reactions what they looked like.

Of course, beauty is also a question of charisma.

Of course; this is how it's given away constantly, and when you observe it in someone else, you can turn toward it. You feel this attraction, the platonic effect – Plato explained it in terms of *anamnesis*, but one could explain it differently as well. Anyway, this is why beauty is always relational. Our sense of beauty is perhaps the strongest self-rewarding element there is, alongside the practice of intelligent or skillful tasks, i.e., the practice of art. Art is also immediately self-rewarding. One shouldn't forget that the Europeans emerged out of the practice of craftsmanship. Today's intellectuals have

forgotten that our ancestors were craftsmen, not a bunch of Leonardo da Vincis. Richard Sennett wrote a book on craftsmanship a few years ago in which he discusses the interesting fact that acquiring the skills of a proper craftsman of any kind requires 10,000 hours of training. Learning an instrument properly takes, on average, about the same time. A genius is someone who, for mysterious reasons, needs only a tenth of the time.

Does that mean craftsmanship has a thymotic component as well?

It does indeed, but it also has the quality of being self-rewarding, the aspect of training. Craftsmanship offers the experience of a positive feedback loop, allowing the simple craftsman to become a virtuoso. What's at work here is a great self-rewarding dynamic that's linked to the quality of generosity.

notes

1. The Lilly Family School of Philanthropy (http://www.philanthropy.iupui.edu).

Marcel Hénaff is a professor of philosophy and anthropology at the University of California, San Diego, in the departments of literature and political science. The fundamental question he has attempted to raise since his earliest works is that of the social bond in its symbolic as well as political aspects. This has led him, under the inspiration of Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss, to investigate practices of ceremonial gift exchange in traditional societies. He views these practices as being primarily procedures of public recognition in human groups. He has shown that this form of agonistic exchange and political pact is entirely unrelated to economic exchanges and is not meant to be a substitute for an economy. Its primary purpose is to affirm the bond of reciprocity and the boundless requirement of respect that underlie every social relationship. This necessarily involves the radical question of the priceless. In his prizewinning "The Price of Truth: Gift, Money, and Philosophy" (2002) and "Le Don des philosophes. Repenser la réciprocité" (2012), Hénaff deals with the question of priceless goods: truth, glory, recognition, and ultimately life itself, in other words, goods that cannot be subjected to commercial relationships without undermining or destroying human dignity. In addition, he has published widely on urbanism, public space and the commons. His essay for this volume explores the tense relation between art, the humanities and the modern market.

the humanities, the arts and the market
total social fact and the question of meaning

Marcel Hénaff

Today artists and humanists, and more generally those engaged in enterprises of knowledge, face increasing pressure from economic interests on their creative activities and their professions, such as teaching and research. When this same pressure affects the fields of science and high technology, we do not feel upset or even surprised by the omnipresence of the market. We recognize that this has to do with the massive investments these activities require and the developments or profits they generate. But now, through the financial choices it forces, the market has also come to determine the use and fate of artworks and the humanities. This appears to us as a new and worrisome situation. Why should the market be interested in the arts, in poetry, literature, or the humanities more generally, and consequently in the institutions in charge of controlling them and passing on knowledge about them?

Two opposite reasons can be given. The first appears paradoxical. It has to do with the belief on the part of economic decision makers that in the vast movement of production and exchange of goods that dominates the activity of contemporary human societies, the humanities are useless and amount to an obstacle to be removed; they are thought of in terms of maintenance costs to do away with. Tactically, the arts and humanities require attention for purposes of monitoring and progressive elimination. They are therefore subjected to stringent production standards and assessment tests related to these standards. The second reason involves an opposite calculus: although the arts and humanities are considered sterile from the standpoint of the production of useful goods, human nature still requires windows onto realms beyond industrial production and commercial exchanges. The arts

and humanities are thus marginally useful to the extent that they provide these cultural elements and provide enjoyment through artworks (e.g., in exhibitions and concerts) that give our existence another dimension. Furthermore, this activity is profitable. The fields of production of the visual arts, music and narrative (whether written or filmed) can fully become what they largely already are: the materials for an immense market. Between, on the one hand, a rejection associated with a radically utilitarian view and, on the other, an acceptance that advocates an aestheticizing and commercial use of the arts and humanities, the choice we face is not encouraging. The threat concerns creators as well as teachers and researchers, not primarily because their professions are endangered (although they are indeed) but because it undermines something that involves the very purpose of our existence as a human community. This is a serious accusation. We must give it serious consideration.

humanities and scholarly culture: knowledge transmission and assessment

Let us consider the case of the humanities. In our modern societies, they are passed down primarily in the form of knowledge: that is, through the activities of teaching and research institutions. The humanities consist in identifiable objects, which can be situated with a critical distance and analyzed using rigorous methods. From this perspective, these objects are subjected to rules of scientific evaluation comparable to those used in the natural sciences; with respect to criteria of objectivity, however, the humanities are at an obvious disadvantage. These limitations and this weakness show that these objects are also something else entirely. In our highly technological societies, aimed at the production of increasingly complex goods, knowledge concerning artworks and, more generally, concerning activities of reflection and interpretation lies at the core of what culture means for us. In other words, our culture has de facto become a scholarly culture. This is irreversible, since for us not only the passing down of tradition but also the creation of the new must be mediated through this knowledge, the (paper-based, electronic, and soon to be biocellular) technological media, and the programs that make them possible.

We must therefore reconsider these activities' reason for being. This involves not only reflecting on the quality of knowledge concerning them but also questioning the duty of those who disseminate it. In our societies, this dissemination is at the core of the cultural process. We must therefore reexamine the enterprise of teaching and research in the humanities. In this respect, the entire academic system needs to reconsider its activities and reason for being: the rigor of its research, the quality of its passing down of knowledge, its creativity and plasticity in an increasingly unpredictable world in terms of technology. These are urgent issues. Since competence in the humanities is increasingly assessed by external (public or private) authorities, the question amounts to determining the basis for an attempt at assessing of this competence, the criteria for this attempt, and its consequences for the role of the humanities in our society. From this perspective, the greatest ambiguity and even a profound confusion prevail. Behind the good intentions claimed by the powers that be (whether political, administrative, or financial), it could be that the actual aim is a massive disinvestment from the entire realm of the humanities and social sciences (or at least from those social sciences that resist statistical models and the hegemony of the theories of rational action prevalent in economics, demography and finance). Does this mean that the global marketplace is in the process of extending its power to works of literary history, textual criticism, metaphysical reflection and formulation of ethical rules? No, not directly, but perhaps it is doing so indirectly, through these new procedures of evaluation of academic disciplines. Is the professional assessment of teaching institutions a screen that conceals a covert intrusion of the market? Or is this an unfounded suspicion, or a new version of an old suspicion against money and commercial exchange, which we must dismiss because it has lost all relevance? What is the nature of this suspicion?

knowledge and money: an age-old conflict

We must recall that, even if one aspect of the ongoing shift is unprecedented, the conflicting relationship between knowledge and money is (in the West) at least 2,500 years old. "[W]e become alternately merchants and merchandise, and we ask, not what a thing truly is, but what it costs." This statement

was made not by Marx or Bourdieu but by Seneca, twenty centuries ago. Even for Seneca, the power of money was not an entirely new problem. The malaise associated with the commodification of knowledge had already been expressed by Plato more than four centuries earlier. It has been rightly said that Plato's entire body of thought developed in reaction to what he viewed as the scandal of Socrates' death sentence. Socrates' enemies not only accused him of "corrupting youth" but also of being a Sophist. But for Plato, a Sophist was not only an expert in the art of false argument but, above all, one who demanded high compensation for teaching this art. As for Socrates, his teaching was always free of charge. At his trial, he proclaimed: "I think I produce a sufficient proof that I speak the truth, namely, my poverty" (*Apology of Socrates*, 31a–c). In fact, in all of Greek and Roman classical culture (as in all ancient cultures), money was suspected of being an agent of disturbance and corruption. The suspicion extended to merchants, most of whom were outsiders who came to the cities to sell goods they had not created and therefore did not know. According to Plato, the Sophists were like merchants: they did not know what they were talking about (*Protagoras*, 313c–e). They were "merchants of knowledge."

It is clear, however, that Plato misunderstood the novelty and power of the Sophists' approach in terms of compensation of the masters of knowledge. The Sophists were the first to understand that a new situation had arisen: the emergence of a new social class eager to master the arts of speech and argument and to gain the status associated with this mastery. There was a demand for training, and it was backed by financial means capable of fulfilling it. From this perspective, democracy appears as the possibility of securing through commercial exchange a good that until then had been reserved for those privileged by birth. Knowledge thus became available just like other forms of competence gained through training (i.e., of musicians, architects, physicians, etc.). There is a market for knowledge from the moment when a particular competence is considered useful or desirable and those who possess it are prepared to pass it on for a compensation that allows them to make a living. From this perspective, there is a decisive connection between the democratic city and the free circulation of the good that knowledge constitutes. Aristotle himself opened the way when he understood the city not only as a community of citizens who aim toward the common good, which is to say a specifically political community – a *politeia* – but also a community of interests – what he calls a *koinonia* – defined by

the diversity and complementarity of occupations. There is such a thing as fair and necessary exchange. The purpose of money as the measure of goods is to establish a proportional relationship among not only disparate products but also heterogeneous agents. Hence the remarkable definition Aristotle gives of money as "the measure of the need we have of one another" (see *Nicomachean Ethics*, V-8). Money is primarily an indicator of positive interdependence, an incomparable instrument for establishing a proportional relationship among goods and their creators. Aristotle, however, adds this reservation: "Knowledge and money have no common measure" (*Eudemian Ethics,* VII10). Aristotle provides Plato with the technical argument he needs. More specifically, this incommensurable knowledge concerns philosophy and everything associated with it. Aristotle's reservation does not apply to the technical teaching of occupations such as medicine, music, architecture and gymnastics.

By demanding compensation for their teaching, the Sophists de facto demonstrated that every form of knowledge could be measured, philosophy included. Technical training for a fee took the place of the personal initiation of a disciple by a master. This was a profound cultural shift. Excellence – *arété*[1] – could now be taught, and those who wished to gain it could do so thanks to those who offered it for a fee. This was the connection that the Sophists implicitly established between the commercial circulation of knowledge and democratic freedom. It was a more complete way of extending the "community of interests" to knowledge as a good and providing a broader version of fair exchange. For modern theorists of justice such as John Rawls[2] and Michael Walzer[3], this connection between democracy and a free and fair market is not only conceivable but indispensable to the extent that what is at stake is access to goods created by others through the income available to everyone (leaving aside the problem of equity in the system of production and compensation of labor).

rethinking the relationship between *politeia* and *oeconomia*: the market and the question of meaning

In the age of Plato, contempt for money was above all a feature of an aristocratic culture that despised wealth acquired through business. Yet this contempt alone does not explain everything. In fact, for classical culture the

role of the economy in general is difficult to define. The economy remains marginal from the perspective of the *politeia*. It is certainly important to properly manage the city's income, collect taxes, and fund infrastructures, public works and city services. But there is nothing great about these activities. Greatness is brought about by war and speeches. Although war needs funding (for fortifications, weapon making, the equipping of ships and stewardship), what really matters and ensures glory is the warriors' action. The economy (production, exchange and consumption) remains literally the business of the house – *oikos* – and therefore a private activity. For Greek thought (and classical thought in general), the economy cannot be part of the public sphere.[4] This marginalization or rejection would remain dominant in European political thought until the industrial and financial revolution in the last third of the eighteenth century. When thinkers and humanists in general realized the importance of the economy (Hegel was among the first[5]), in a way it was already too late: economic thought had developed without them, thanks to its own theorists – economists – who had their own lexicon, questions and methods, and a new idea: the market was self-regulating, as if guided by an invisible hand. It spontaneously created order and justice. Are we still to expect the sovereign State to provide them? No, we are not, economists tell us, or else to the least extent possible. Of what use, then, are humanists, writers, artists and even scientists? From an economic perspective, little or none. Adam Smith is quite blunt about this: servants, like politicians, judges, soldiers, artists, teachers, physicians, lawyers and the clergy, are incapable of providing the production required for their own reproduction.[6] Although useless to production, however, they are still socially useful. Smith says no more about them; it appears that for him they are parasites necessary to the existence of society. In fact, his views are not as simplistic as they might seem (as we see in the rest of his work, and especially his great earlier book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*[7]). But in *The Wealth of Nations* he insists on writing from the perspective of a rational economist, and as such he precludes any consideration of the fact that not only is social reproduction broader and more complex than economic reproduction alone but, also and above all, economic reproduction would fail if it were unable to encompass every aspect of collective life, including traditions, beliefs, the many forms of knowledge, administrative services, and even entertainment – everything that makes up a society.

But do activities that are not directly productive have no purpose beyond this function of symbolic compensation? What is at stake here? In the final analysis, what good are the humanities? If they cannot create useful goods, could their purpose be to *give meaning* to everything else? Does this mean resorting to the services of institutions that develop scholarly knowledge about texts and works and enable those who have access to this heritage to enjoy it? But what about those who do not? Are they excluded from this purpose? Does this knowledge contribute to a renewal of this heritage, to the creation of new intellectual resources or works? Is this what "meaning" amounts to – this hermeneutic comfort? Or does providing meaning instead amount to giving reasons for living and means of understanding our species, our world and our fate? Who is to receive these? Are religions not intended to provide these answers? Do they not do so much more successfully? Once again, is this what "meaning" amounts to? Is it the secure knowledge of an ultimate purpose? Is it the promise of salvation? Who is to receive this message? We must go beyond this, recognize our finitude, and acknowledge that the question is more acute and disturbing than it appears. We must move further back and situate this question within a broader horizon.

the humanities before the humanities: oral and written societies

For understanding the impasse we are facing, calling on an anthropological perspective can be illuminating. Doing so forces us to distance ourselves to the maximum degree. In societies based on oral tradition – which numerous ethnographic inquiries conducted over the past century enable us to better know – what could be the counterpart of what we call the humanities or culture? It is the narratives (myths, legends and tales) passed down within the group, as well as the arts of expressing oneself, living together and appearing in public: forms of speech, songs, dances, verbal and gestural courtesies, clothing and cooking; and various artifacts: dwellings made of various materials, tools, utensils, precious objects and ritual objects. Talking, telling stories, celebrating and creating artifacts – these activities are all part of the group's life, and they express its system of thought. New generations assimilate this system through a collective education involving initiation rituals

that recur at regular intervals. But this education is inseparable from the practices of everyday life at every level of expression and action: speech, knowhow, representations, the creation of objects meant for ordinary or ceremonial use, subsistence activities and modes of decision. Production, transformation, education and the passing down of knowledge are performed by the entire group.

The emergence of writing introduced a profound transformation. Writing emerged in societies that resulted from agricultural and urban revolution, which were also societies that tended to become unequal. Writing made it possible to store an unlimited amount of narrative, knowledge and knowhow.[8] We moved into the age of cumulative time. Experts in writing were needed to establish and absorb this physical memory, as well as to pass it down. Scholarly cultures thus arose, along with the institutions in charge of producing them. A chasm developed between scholarly culture and folk culture. The latter consists in forms of language, types of narrative, music, artifacts, representations and various forms of knowledge, most of which are excluded from written culture. Written culture, however, is sometimes capable of incorporating them in its products, thus creating the most innovative works, those that most affect the public. This can be said of Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Molière and Tolstoy, to keep to well-known literary examples. But the chasm remains, all the more so because the initiation rituals found in oral societies have been replaced by the teaching procedures of the school system, with its examinations that determine acceptance to universities and other institutions of higher education that secure a privileged access to language and knowledge. Competence here has become the key to power, as the Sophists understood. Power in this sense is not pure domination (which is pathological when its purpose is not to serve) but the actualization of latent capabilities and cooperation in the implementation of a collective task.

Along with the emergence of writing, another highly significant phenomenon occurred in the economic realm. From then on, tradition was passed down through an externalized form of memory, one requiring specialized training through a school system. Both aspects – document-based memory and the professionalized passing on of knowledge – involved the development of *intangible goods* that were no longer passed down by oral communities in an integrated, even unself-conscious manner (since in oral

societies these are part of the processes of social reproduction). From then on, these became objectified and available goods. One could choose to acquire or not to acquire them. They came to be available in a marketplace in which they had a price. Ritual or decorative objects became artworks, available for private purchase.[9] One can choose to buy books, and to gain an education by compensating those who offer it. The relevant issue is not so much desire for these goods as it is access to them, which now depends on financial means. This applies to books (manuscripts at first, then printed documents) as well as to teaching since classical times.[10] The same can be said of medieval universities (if we take into account the problems created by the supply provided free of charge by monastic orders).[11] Books as objects have remained available for commercial purchase (though protected by copyright only since the late eighteenth century). At most, the development of libraries accessible to all has provided access to an incomparable array of books free of charge.[12] As for education, it was not considered a public good to be provided free of charge by a democratic state to its citizens until the nineteenth century. Since writing and teaching have become measurable goods, like anything else, they have been subject to assessment and formatting with a view to commercial exchange. There are two kinds of exchangeable goods: tangible and intangible. The former appear relatively easy to quantify and measure, since they are objects (books included), regardless of the material of which they are made. The case of visual artworks, however, shows that what matters is not the material as such but a value that amounts to an assessment that is inseparable from a price recognized among professionals (and therefore within a network of connoisseurs who are in agreement on the status of a given work).

As for intangible goods in general, they require a complex assessment process based on criteria that are more intuitive, or more dependent on renown. This is also the case for knowledge, knowhow and competence (e.g., of physicians, architects, teachers, and artists). For centuries, these have been assigned reasonable public prices. What is new today is the extension of criteria of assessment to all kinds of intangible goods, such as personal services that were until recently provided by one's community or friends – assistance given to the sick, disabled and elderly. The market in services no longer has any bounds. The logic of the marketplace applies to everything that can be

formatted and sold, starting with information, services, artistic talent and professional competence of any kind.

This competence has become the object of a merciless competition, since it is increasingly clear that knowledge is the main engine of modern power. Marx was aware of this truth, which is now incontrovertible. This is why teaching institutions have become entities on which the future of states depends. Financial powers have understood this, and they will not allow states to enjoy a monopoly on these institutions. For the sake of comparison, it can be claimed that teaching institutions constitute fields of wealth more valuable than fields of fossil energy. They are infinitely renewable. Their renewal depends only on innovative research, storing procedures, training programs and methods of management. In this respect, the relationship between public and private powers is either a competition or a synergy. But in both cases, teaching institutions find it necessary to subject themselves to standards of assessment capable of guaranteeing the value of their products. It is difficult to challenge this requirement, since the purpose of efforts at assessing institutions of knowledge is assumed to be the preservation or enhancement of their quality (which may seem an unquestionable goal) while casting aside what does not satisfy or no longer satisfies the demands of the marketplace. From this perspective, it is increasingly clear that for financial investors the humanities are not a high priority. More seriously, the marketplace could in the long run consider doing away with them. What does this trend portend for the future of our societies?

market and total social fact

Keeping to the central points in the evolution of the contemporary economy, let us recall two things: 1. The absorption of industrial capitalism by financial capitalism, which began as far back as the last third of the nineteenth century, has been completed. It resulted in the crash of 1929 as well as the one that has been under way since 2008. 2. The incorporation of the economic into the political has also been completed, to such an extent that every political project appears primarily as a program and management of the economy. In other words, the economic realm has taken on or claimed the status of what anthropologists call a "total social fact." The concept was introduced by Marcel Mauss in his famous work *The Gift* to describe ritual

exchanges among groups in traditional societies, such as the potlatch in the American Northwest and the kula in the Trobriand Islands.[13] In such societies, every activity (the production of goods, religious rituals, crafts, visual works, political organization and ethical attitudes) is defined around and dependent on these festive occasions for gift exchange. The exchanges constitute a total social fact in that they incorporate every aspect of collective life. Every aspect of life is subordinated to these exchanges (within which the production of physical goods is "embedded," to use Polanyi's word).[14] Above all, they give *meaning* to collective existence by creating or renewing an alliance among groups or individuals and celebrating a community of sharing, making it a source of glory in and enjoyment of being together. In classical Greece, the function of total social fact was assumed by political activity; in medieval Europe, by Christianity.[15] In Tibet, the total social fact was Buddhist monasticism.[16] In Mongolian society in the age of the khans, it was war.[17]

In our societies, economic activity de facto appears to take on this integrating function: it involves and sometimes conditions every public and private activity. Furthermore, the financial market now provides the dominant figure of this integrating function. The market is everywhere. It seems increasingly capable of controlling artistic creation, access to knowledge, health care and research. What is its aim? As we know, it is to maximize profits. Can this constitute a "total social fact," i.e., give meaning to collective life? The masters of finance themselves know quite well that it cannot. Their implicit thinking actually amounts to a profound form of nihilism. This is precisely why they find it convenient to let religion – or rather those forms that are best adjusted to the media and most capable of commercial manipulation – take charge of giving meaning to collective life by holding out a promise of salvation to humankind and to every individual. But these masters let religion do this only on the condition that it occur in a kind of parallel sector, and, if possible, by placing religious groups themselves under the control of financial power (as in the cases of televangelism in the USA and the proliferation of all kinds of cults that amount to fundraising enterprises).

This leads us to two sets of questions:

- If we reject the market's hegemonic claim, is there anything else today that could constitute a total social fact as defined by anthropologists?

Maybe not. Such would be the tragic dimension of our modernity: living in this fragmented society, aware that no unity can be reached – this could even be what makes us moderns.

- Should we therefore conclude that the humanities have failed beyond repair? Should we accept that they are incapable of providing reasons for being that are more than scholarly interpretations and of satisfying the yearning for an art of living and forms of thinking that can be shared among all the members of a society? This seems unlikely. Neither the acceptance of today's world nor the anticipation of a new world can arise from knowledge alone. Should we then give up?

A powerful alternative to this nihilistic doubt is available to us, expressed in our constant efforts to create what we call works of art, whether visual (painting, film, photography, video), plastic (sculpture, installations, architecture, landscaping) or literary (fiction, essays, poetry). Even if these creations can be offered for sale in a market, they are primarily ways of giving a publicly recognizable form to sensory experiences and offering them for an aesthetic and critical assessment whose criteria are at the same time immediate and complex, spontaneous and constructed (defining these criteria would require a different and immense discussion). It is as if artworks, seemingly detached from the world of everyday life, were paradoxically endowed with an ability to capture and catalyze collective life; as if the fact that they generate enjoyment without self-interest, and shared admiration, removed them from exclusively private appropriations (even if such appropriations do occur to some extent). According to Arendt, the specificity of the artwork is that, in contrast to a consumer good, it testifies to permanence and to a meaning inseparable from what we call "beauty":

> [The products of art] can fulfill their own being, which is appearance, only in a world which is common to all. […] Generally speaking, culture indicates that the public realm […] offers its place of display to those things whose essence it is to appear and to be beautiful. […] Seen against the background of political experience and of activities which, if left to themselves, come and go without leaving any trace in the world, beauty is the very manifestation of imperishability. […] Without the beauty, that is, the radiant glory in which potential im-

> mortality is made manifest in the human world, all human life would be futile and no greatness could endure. The common element connecting art and politics is that they both are phenomena of the public world" [18]

Artworks thus enable us to experience something larger and more intense than conceptual knowledge alone (knowledge brought about by the natural sciences as well as by various theoretical disciplines, philosophy included), in a relationship to the world and to goods that challenges the hegemonic claim of the market and commercial relationships. Along with this resistance, this openness can be sensed in the shift currently under way, which, despite all the manipulations exerted by the prevalent greed, traces very original lines of hope. The new means of expression and communication are not only an outlet for a long-repressed folk culture: conversely, they also make possible an unprecedented dissemination of complex forms of knowledge and so-called canonical works to new publics and through new media. This effects a profound transformation of the nature of scholarly culture. Artworks – whether literary, visual or musical – no longer appear as the privileged goods of an elite but as objects meant for everyone. These intelligent and complex objects generate knowledge effects, critical effects and creation effects, because they are endowed at the same time with memory, knowledge and the ability to break with the information system, and they are thus endowed with a high potential for innovation. *Artworks – whether visual, musical, or language-based – are not only things to be understood; they also enable us to understand*. They are, in and of themselves, interpretations of the world, with powers of translation; experiments, instruments for other relationships, capable of establishing networks with other artworks from other fields and other cultures. The new means of communication make possible another form of appropriation for other modes of community. These means could provide the new opportunity the humanities need. They do not promise salvation, but they enable us to create and to think, to struggle in the finitude of our existence at this time in our history. Since the writing revolution almost 5,000 years ago, we have always had to learn through new modes. The printing press brought about a new acceleration in the access to writings, which contributed to the emergence of modern subjectivity. This movement has not stopped for the past five centuries, and thanks to

the new media, it will never stop. Thus, an opportunity is taking shape for all of us. Furthermore, a requirement for the common good now has a new possibility of being actualized. The crucial function of teaching is to work at the intersection of passed-down memory and new media, between heritage and invention; to preserve the critical requirement and the ethic of sharing. This is and will be an enduring struggle. To let the market sort us out and decide who will have access to scientific knowledge and creation, to the knowledge of artworks and humanities, is nothing less than a denial of democracy. At a more fundamental level, it is an intolerable breach of the very possibility of a true community among human beings.

giving meaning?

Let us return to the phrase "giving meaning." It has been used in ambiguous and often superficial ways. What is at stake here is not the phenomenological question of the attribution of meaning, or even the question of giving (in which the verb *to give* has a merely attributive meaning, which suggests that we should not view it as having an oblative connotation). Giving meaning must be understood in a more general sense, which at the same time has to do with the intelligibility of things, their existential coherence, value and destination. The idea of meaning therefore simultaneously includes several aspects: cognitive, metaphysical, symbolic and moral. Meaning, however, is something that cannot be guaranteed, or preserved in a kind of reservation, and can even less be obtained as a commodity in a market for "cultural goods" (generally along with an emphatic humanism). This market precisely tends toward a formatting that aims at functional saturation and a will to command the creations of the mind. In contrast, the critical power of artworks – their distancing and opening power – is precisely that which is required for thinking: meaning must not be objectified but recognized in its incompletion, withdrawal or fragility. Through an obscure form of knowing, we sense not only that there are questions but that *we are the question* from which every question arises, starting with the question of meaning.

notes

1. This term is usually translated as "virtue," which does not render its true meaning.
2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1971.
3. Michel Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, Ney York, Basic Books, 1983.
4. Moses Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1973.
5. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Law* [1820], Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.
6. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* [1776], Oxford, Clarendon, 1976; chap. III.
7. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [1759], Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2002.
8. Eric A. Havelock, *Origins of Western Literacy*, Toronto, 1976; Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1986; Clarisse Herren-schmidt, *Les Trois écritures: Langue, nombre, code*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987.
9. Walter Benjamin traces a similar genealogy in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* [1936], Prism Key Press, Scottsdale, 2010.
10. Henri I. Marrou, *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'Antiquité*, Paris, Seuil, 1950 [*A History of Education in Antiquity*, New York, Shee & Ward, 1956].
11. Jacques Le Goff, *Les Intellectuels au Moyen-Âge*, Paris, Seuil, 1975 [*Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Mass., Blackwell, 1992].
12. Roger Chartier, *Culture écrite et société*, Paris, A. Michel, 1996.
13. Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* [1922], New York, Dutton, 1961.
14. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* [1944], Boston, Beacon, 1957.
15. Jacques Le Goff, *La Civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*, Paris, Arthaud, 1964,
16. Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies,* Smithsonian Institution Press, Princeton, 1997; see also Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share* [1949], New York, Zone Books, 1991.
17. René Grousset, *L'Empire des steppes* [1938], Paris, Payot, 1965.
18. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, [1954], New York, Viking Press, 1968, 218.

Zygmunt Bauman (b. 1925) is a world-renowned Polish-British sociologist and philosopher famous for his concepts of liquid and solid modernity, which he introduced to get rid of the vaguest of terms like postmodernity and modernism. He is one of the last thinkers of any standing today who is able to give a both well-argued and radically negative critique on what's happening to people like us who are struggling to survive and make sense of our lives within a consumerist society. His numerous books include "Liquid Life" (2005), "Liquid Fear" (2006), "Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty" (2007) and "Culture in a Liquid Modern World" (2011). We asked him about the value of art, starting from the problematics of the future of art.

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the good society and the future of art

An Interview with Zygmunt Bauman
by Isolde Vanhee and Tom Van Imschoot

IV/TVI: The future opens the present, or the potential that is in the present, in order to prepare for the future. What do you envision to be a possible future of art?

ZB: Every moment of history – the very moment we're sitting here – is a bunch of possibilities. Only one of them will become flesh. But firstly, you don't know in advance which one will become reality, and secondly, very importantly, history is made by us, even if we don't know it. There's no history outside human beings. There's no history running without participation by you: you and everybody, including me. So we're products of a history we didn't select when we were born. You didn't choose who your parents were, whether they lived on the streets or were directing a factory or whatever. But history is also our product. We make history too. There's a mutual relationship. When we speak about possibilities, we need to understand these two different things. There's more than one possibility. And which one will be victorious and which one will be forgotten, or killed or stillborn, depends on us.

Understanding and at the same time acceptance of responsibility: that is the function of art today. First of all, to enhance understanding of the logic of your situation in the world. And secondly, to bring to your awareness your responsibility for the future. When the future comes, it's not a future any longer. It's a present. And until it comes and becomes a present, it's up for grabs. Do something about it. If you want a good future, you have to work. It's as simple as that. Art has a double function. I'm not pretending that all art today is good at it. I'm still trying to figure out how cutting a cow in half brings a better future. But the ideal art, art which can actually

play an important role, which is worth subsidizing because it performs a very important function, is an art which promotes two things: comprehension and responsibility.

Could you give an example of the kind of art you're referring to?

Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* (2006) would be a case in point. He speaks to the inner, undiscovered fears and nightmares of our present generation. If we go on as we're living today, what he describes might be our future. Daniel25 is cloned, and he's living in this paradise made by humankind. He sits alone on the sea coast, no human being around. And he calculates that he has sixty more years to live. He calculates how many days that is, how many hours, how many minutes, how many seconds. And he's in despair: how can his survival succeed if he has to live a life that's completely stripped of meaning? Because the meaning of life is to overcome difficulties. Not the difficulties but overcoming the difficulties: that is the meaning of life.

Modernity is mostly about more comfort and less inconvenience. Modernizing means making things easy, not requiring any effort, not having any troubles, any suffering. Wolfgang Goethe, the great German poet, when he was almost my age, was asked whether he had a happy life. And he answered – and this is something all people should know; it's really key to understanding life – he said, "Yes, I had a very happy life." And after a moment he added, "But I don't remember a single happy week."

That's precisely what he meant: a happy life doesn't consist of happiness today, tomorrow, the day after. That's virtually impossible. In one of his poems, he wrote that there was nothing as awful as a long series of beautiful days. Happiness is the overcoming of difficulties. Therefore, there is something basically wrong in the modern concept of happiness. Because it just strips life of its beauty, its meaning, its significance.

Should art be about everyday life?

Yes, of course. Starting with Courbet in the nineteenth century, the topic of art has been everyday life. Or even going back to Flemish art from the Middle Ages. They started it, actually. But as far as modern art is concerned,

it mostly starts with Courbet, showing people working in the fields or factories, this sort of thing in daily circumstances.

But I understand that one of the tasks of presenting daily life in art is to show that it's not the only way of living. It should push the viewer, or the listener or the reader, to step ahead, to stand aside and look from outside at what seems to be obvious. What's self-evident for the insiders suddenly becomes a problem. The familiar becomes unfamiliar. Normally you don't ask questions about the familiar. Because you know it, so what is there to ask? But the unfamiliar prompts you to ask questions. You start to look critically at daily life.

And secondly, everyday life is a merciless problem today. Everyday life, when I was young, meant routine. Everyday life today, in our experience, is, on the contrary, the breaking of routine. It's all changing. From one day to the next, you're the proud owner of an iPhone 4, and suddenly you hear there's an iPhone 5, so you have to throw it away and replace it. Otherwise, you'll be kicked out of the good society as a backward, underdeveloped person, so to speak. And so to depict everyday life today, the artist should depict constant change.

A good example are those artists – there are many of them – who expose their works to nature. So they leave them to the influence of wind, rain, frost, and unlike the painters of the quattrocento or cinquecento, they don't look for rare and solid materials, like marble, which is resistant to the influence of time, or paints that don't crack with time or lose color. Contemporary artists, on the contrary, like to use degradable materials. That's very important. Because it exposes you to the transience of everything around. When an installation is placed somewhere in the forest, it looks one way, but you come months later and it looks different. And it's not because of neglect by the sculptor but because of his intentions. He wants it to represent not just his design but also the impact of time.

But if we live in constant change, and you make a work that's exposed to constant change, where do you make a difference?

You're a person who's aware of transience and changing values. For most of history, durability was valued much more highly than transience . Rich people surrounded themselves with lasting things. Buildings were built of

durable stone. Dresses were made of lasting materials. And so on. Transient things were left to the people lower down. Now it's reversed. It's poor people who are burdened with the impossibility of throwing things away and replacing them with novelty, while cultural elites are no longer sticking to eternal values. They want to be at home everywhere. They want to spot every short-lived fashion. They want to be au courant with what's going on. We're actually – as Erikson, the Danish sociologist, so nicely put it – under the tyranny of the moment, of this flow, this liquidity, as I call it.

You're already aware of it. But people can be misled. Look, you're constantly running. There's no harbor where you can drop anchor. You can't stop; you don't reflect. That also requires enlightenment – not just experiencing liquidity but also articulating that experience. So everything is changeable. When people come for the second time to the same forest and look at the same sculpture changed, I think they will pause and reflect.

It's the same with knowledge. We look something up one day and forget it the next.

Our culture isn't a culture of learning but of forgetting. The pressure of the culture we experience now is to forget what you've learned yesterday because we're looking for a different answer to a question today. The question can still be very urgent, but the answer can be very different. We live under the pressure of fashion. That starts very early in life today. Even at seven years old, children go to school, and if they wear last year's sneakers they'll be laughed at by their peers. There's always some new gadget. We're drilled into actually accepting this transience of things, this quick rotation from an object of delight to the dustbin. The way from here to there is shortening. That's how consumerist society works. It's based on this intention to replace things.

And it will mean your children and your children's children will have no planet to live on because of our tremendously wasteful way of conducting life. We throw away fully usable things simply for the sake of novelty, simply because it's shameful to stick to durable products. The short stretch is even built into so-called durable products. If you were born two generations ago, probably your mother would have given you a big box of all these bed linens that your mother had used and that you'd use when you had your own family.

Now no one thinks like that. It would mean you were at the bottom of society, you were underprivileged, the underclass.

How did this change of values came about?

It's a long story. Roughly, until the end of the nineteenth century, the general opinion, including that of the greatest minds of economics and social sciences, was that the amount of human need was a given. You could calculate how many people you had on earth, so you could calculate how many products you'd need to satisfy all their needs. The need to build factories, to develop, to decrease the gross national product, was a temporary irritant. Once we achieved that, all the needs were satisfied, effort would no longer be necessary. You could relax. We'd just monotonously reproduce the same amount of goods as before.

At the end of the nineteenth century, this great new idea of the department stores appeared. Why should people only buy things because they need them? They should buy them because they desire them. Because they find them beautiful, unusual, exciting or whatever. Between the wars, there was a quarrel between two titans of American industry. One was Henry Ford. Ford was famous for saying, "I make cars in any color as long as it's black." Why? Because he thought in nineteenth-century terms. The car was there to take you from here to there. Once every American had a car to take him from here to there, that was it. Then he'd only produce cars to replace the old cars, which were black.

At General Motors, Ford's main competitor, there was Alfred P. Sloan, a wizard with a vision. He was predicting the future. More, he was determined to make the future. That's important. He felt responsible for the future. He asked this question: Why should cars only satisfy the need for mobility? Why shouldn't we sell ways of making passes at a girl – seducing her with a beautiful car? Or just making your neighbor green with envy? Sloan's idea was to connect the car with completely different things – no longer with the need for survival but with social ambition. Greed for being creditworthy, advancing in the social hierarchy, and that sort of thing.

We're only interested in impressing people to show that we're worthy people. How else to do it than by showing: Look, I'm more advanced in running after changing fashions than you are? People sometimes queue for

several days at shops because they want to be the first to buy a new item. Not just to buy it – they want to be first. Until the next hype comes and everybody greedy for social recognition throws it away in order to replace it with a new gadget.

Isn't this a problem for art too? People queuing for a big Edward Hopper exhibition while there's no interest in a small museum or gallery?

The emphasis of galleries and museums has shifted considerably from objects to events. What attracts people to MOMA? They don't advertise the masterpieces they have but what kind of events will happen that day. The facades of great museums look like calendars. Dates, dates, dates. They attract people. The great masters … I'll give you an example: Vermeer. There was a retrospective of his work in The Hague. People made pilgrimages from all over the world to see it. Even most serious people. The late Leszek Kolakowksi, my friend, the great philosopher, he used all his influence just to get a ticket. He was almost an invalid. He couldn't stand in the queue. Whenever I travel in Europe – and I travel quite a lot for lectures – I go in the local galleries and museums. There are many Vermeers in the museums, but I've never seen a crowd looking at them. To attract viewers, you need to convince them that this is the one and only chance. I repeat, we are living under the tyranny of the moment. Now all 29 canvases by Vermeer are under one roof. That's the event. Not that they're Vermeers. Vermeers can be seen in many museums. But they're all together. That's an event you can tell your grandchildren about: your grandfather saw all 29 Vermeers in one room.

It's not only the tyranny of the moment but of the exceptional moment.

Unrepeatable. Unique. There are people who go to Sotheby's for auctions. They buy things because they're rare. That's why even an incredibly good copy of an original is very much lower in value, because what you are after is the unique. There are not very many of these unique objects, unfortunately. They're only available for the super-rich, the people really at the top. But the poor man's equivalent of the rarity of the object is the uniqueness of the

time. The rarity of the event. For example, the German Reichstag wrapped in plastic – you could only see it for one week. Then it disappeared. People were making pilgrimages from all over Germany and outside Germany. They can't afford to go to the auction at Sotheby's, because they're not multimillionaires, but they can buy a ticket to Berlin and have a look.

> *We're so involved in constantly changing time and liquid modernity that we long for someone to tell us what the future holds. Would you agree that we're perhaps a bit obsessed with the future, while at the same time having no idea what it will be like?*

You're always obsessed with what you miss, because that's a normal human quality. There's nothing special about that. But we lack a vision of the future for a relatively simple reason. A vision of the future means a vision of a good society, a society which resolves the troubles and unpleasantnesses we're suffering from at the moment. All utopias had that vision of the future. All the ills of the moment would be resolved. Visions of a good society, even debates about a good society, aren't very popular today, and there's one reason for that.

When I was young, people quarreled about what to do, but they never quarreled about who was going to do it. They trusted their governments, their states, their parliaments; they would have all the resources necessary to make the future. Now we don't believe that anymore. People have lost trust, not just in political parties but in the whole political system. It's not able to deliver.

Why? That's far away from the problems of art today. It lies in what I call the divorce between power and politics. Power means the ability to get things done. Politics means the ability to decide which things ought to be done. Both power and politics, until quite recently – thirty or forty years ago – were concentrated in the hands of the nation-state. Nation-states had the power to get things done. So the apparatus, the institutions, the democracy, the parliament, the elections, the supreme court and so on made judgments about which things ought to be done and which ought to be rejected.

Now, unfortunately, most of the power has evaporated into the global space, where it can't be reached by local politics. Not only the Dutch or Belgian government but even the American government can't rule over the

floating powers of their extraterritorial companies. If these companies don't like local politics, they just pick up their laptops and their iPhones and go away. And you're left to stew in your own juices, in trouble. So power has already to a great extent become a global phenomenon, but politics remains local, as before. We don't have global politics. We have only national politics. We have state politics. What we call international politics is just the gathering of the local party ministers or presidents.

Even the great philosophers don't talk about the issue of a good society any more. Even if they knew what a good society looked like, they'd have no inkling of who was going to get us there. There's no force. We don't have power and politics married to each other. They're living in a divorce.

So who has authority now? Who's in charge?

I don't know what you mean by authority. Authority means respected power, not just power. Politicians don't have authority, not much. They're objects of ridicule and humiliation. People coming to parliamentary elections normally don't vote for an idea or a movement they favor but against the movement that's already frustrated them, which was in power. I believe people are wrong to do that. Most journalists described the passage from Mr. Zapatero to Mr. Rajoy in Spain as a turn to the right and the passage for Monsieur Sarkozy to Monsieur Hollande as a turn to the left – it was nothing like that. I'm almost sure that if Rajoy had been prime minister during the credit collapse in 2008, Mr. Zapatero would be prime minister in Spain now, and if Hollande had been president during the collapse, then Sarkozy would be president now. It has nothing to do with left/right, with rejecting certain ideas. The political behavior of most Europeans today is guided by frustration. Every government in power is bound to disappoint electors. They must promise, because they're dependent on their electors, but they can't deliver, because they don't have power.

But doesn't humankind have the aibility, maybe through art, to imagine alternatives?

I don't have a recipe for it. You're the youngsters. You're responsible for it. I don't have time anymore to do anything.

Do you detect trends signaling a change in this divorce between politics and power?

I believe that the 21st century will be dedicated to remarrying power and politics. But how it's going to come about I have no idea. We're just climbing a very steep mountain, and until we come to the mountain pass, to the top, I don't think we'll know what's on the other side. I'm quite sure that unless we find the other side, there will be real trouble for humanity. You can't live in this state of divorce between power and politics for long. It's disastrous, catastrophic, apocalyptic.

But I'm also sure we'll eventually find the global equivalent of what our great-grandfathers invented for the nation-state. They invented representative democracy. They invented general elections. They invented parliament. They invented separation of powers: juridical, executive, legislative, and so on. They put it all in place. It was all made to the measure of the concept of the sovereign, territorial nation-state. Now we have to invent some equivalent of that, but at the level of humanity, globally. I hope that it will be found by your generation or your children's generation. And I'm quite sure that when it is found, it will be very different from what we know now.

I participated in a public discussion in Venice with Johan Galtung, a Norwegian professor. A very wise man. He's much wiser than I am, because he's not another theorist, he's a practitioner. He worked in all sorts of international companies. He was asked the question: What about a world parliament? We know that, for better or worse, parliaments work. Ah, said Galtung. Suppose we have a world government. It would have 1,000 Chinese, 750 Indians, 50 Germans, 5 Norwegians. He looked around and said: I don't see much enthusiasm for a world parliament.

So that's not what's going to happen. If Aristotle was brought to Britain's Westminster to listen to the proceedings, I suspect that he'd like what he saw. Because people are arguing, people are quarreling, people are trying to convince each other. It comes to the vote. All right. But if he was told that that was democracy, he would laugh. Because for him, democracy was people coming together at the marketplace and shouting.

So we'll probably need to shift from representational democracy to some other form of democracy?

To something else, yes. Representative it must be. I don't think that direct democracy is in the cards. But probably a great deal of subsidizing, of reviving the local communities, of delegating quite a lot of power to local communities. Local communities now are living in the worst circumstances, because they're also drained of their power by the central state. But what if we use both? Combine the best of both worlds: the face-to-face relationship – neighborhood, cohabitation, which is always local cohabitation – and the emerging possibilities of the cooperation of humanity on a global scale. It's something we haven't ever dealt with before. It's not a program for the next elections; it will take time. But nevertheless, that seems to be the way.

Karl Jaspers said famously that his greatest nightmare was a world government. Why? Because there would be nowhere left to escape. We need a unity which accepts variety. Since the time of the Enlightenment, unity has been associated with universality, with homogeneity. If we achieve this kind of unity, that means everybody will be like everybody else. That's not in the cards. The diversity of humanity will stay. The problem is how to develop the art of the united, live peacefully and beneficially under conditions of perpetual diversity. That's a puzzle. That's a question. But I have no answer. Do you have any more urgent questions?

We'd like to pose one final question, about the Internet. Noah Chomsky said the washing machine was a more empowering invention than the Internet. How do you feel about the new technology?

It's another Pandora's box full of problems. I wonder when art will start representing it. We have split personalities, all of us. We're living in two worlds at the same time: online and offline. According to the latest social research studies, younger generations spend more than seven hours a day in contact not with people but with the screen. Online and offline are two worlds, and they're guided by different rules. What's normal or acceptable online is not at all attainable or approved offline, and vice versa. We're confronted with the task of reconciling these two different words.

The offline world has an advantage over online in the sense of supporting your life in reality. Realities are harsh and demanding. They're sometimes felt to be very inconvenient. People look at you. People watch you. People

demand things from you. You have to abide by their rules. You can't be absolutely free. Sometimes these realities are experienced as oppressive. But on the other hand, they're reliable. Take your home: you know where to go after work. You know where to relax. You have your routines. And so on.

Online has a tremendous advantage over offline, because it goes far ahead of offline in implementing the modern dream of convenience and comfort. It's all very comfortable, very easy. What's terribly difficult in real, offline life is so easy there. You can make 500 friends in one day, and you can actually throw away 500 friends in one day by stopping answering their messages and effacing their names from your network. Entering into relations and breaking relations is tremendously easy. Changing your identity is easy. If you want to pretend to be someone else in the real offline world, it'll be a struggle to do it. You can't live in several different communities, pretending to be someone else in each one. But online, again, it's terribly easy. You can have 25 identities if you want and participate in 25 completely different circles who don't communicate with each other and be happy.

That used to be the privilege of artists.

Well. Not only in this is the Internet easy. Plagiarism is easy. Every student will tell you how easy life is online. You can just copy whatever you like from websites. The more obscure the website the better: the teacher won't recognize it, since there are too many to scrutinize all of them. What will come out of this? Again, your guess is as good as mine.

There's a distinct possibility that the young people who can't understand how life was possible without mobile telephones, since they've never experienced such a life, will probably try – not necessarily deliberately; simply because they were trained like that – they will try to transplant the rules guiding the online world into the offline world. That's already visible. People are trying to make real partnerships between human beings as if they were online. Now you are, and now you are not. Now I am, and now I am not. It lasts as long as my interest. If I lose interest, goodbye, and that's it. That's what I describe as the new great brittleness of human bonds, which also has consequences. How deep those consequences will be – it's too early to draw conclusions. But something very important is happening.

And that's only one impact of the Internet. There are many others. There are already people who say there will be brain implants which will make all these manual operations, keyboards and wires redundant. You'll communicate your souls directly to the Internet, and the Internet will insert souls directly into your brain. Maybe it's an Orwellian fantasy; I have no idea. Don't press me to play a prophet, because I'm not one. But the possibilities of the Internet are much wider than we realize; there's no question about that. And we should simply watch very carefully what's happening. Perhaps if you notice things, it will already be too late to change them.

Joris Luyendijk (b. 1971) is a Dutch journalist who over the past few years researched the world of high finance in the City of London. He published his findings in a blog for "The Guardian." Here, we enter a cosmos where only money seems to matter, a world of greed populated by "Wolf of Wall Street" types. But Luyendijk's peculiar discovery is that the cement and drive of this world aren't made up of just money. There are also non-pecuniary values that have to do with prestige and trust. In this interview, Luyendijk tells about his years as a sort of anthropologist of the tribe of the finance people. Luyendijk published a widely discussed book on his years as a journalist in the Middle East, "Hello Everybody! One Journalist's Search for Truth in the Middle East" (2010). His next book, on the City, will be published in 2015.

the city people tribe

An Interview with Joris Luyendijk by Arjen Mulder

AM: For more than two years you did research both as a journalist and as an anthropologist on what we might call the tribe of the City People: that is, workers in the financial district of London, one of the main nodes in the global financial system. What made you decide to do this research?

JL: *The Guardian* asked me to do it. In 2011 I met editor Alan Rusbridger at a conference and spoke to him about how the Internet could offer lots of new ways to open up closed sorts of fields for journalistic research. I sent him my book about the Middle East, *People Like Us* (2010); then he invited me over to London and asked if I wanted to come work for *The Guardian*. Then he said, “Why don’t you delve into the financial sector?” It was three years after the Lehman event, the near-death experience of the financial system, and it seemed that everything was back to normal again.

The problem you faced was the same as in most anthropological research. Here we have this foreign tribe; how can I enter their domain to study their living habits?

It was worse than that. A foreign tribe either kills you or welcomes you. But in this tribe, in the world of finance, there’s a code of silence. The PR and communications departments of all the banks monitor the press every day to find out if any of their people have spoken to the press without authorization. And then they fire them. Or you’re disciplined or you miss out on a promotion. Subtly or not so subtly, they’re punishing these people and making an example of them. So there’s this very strict code of silence, even in

smaller firms. Because apart from the banks there are lots of smaller and medium-sized financial services firms, but even there the code is in place. I met the owner of one of these firms, and he said, "You can look and walk around and sit here for a few days, but you cannot mention us by name, because our clients wouldn't understand. They wouldn't get why we would speak to outsiders about what's going on." So it's partly about secrecy but also reputation. Finance is all about reputation. If people start to talk to the press, you can't control what they say and how it's presented. So it makes sense to try to control it, but the outcome is a very strong divide between insiders and outsiders.

How did you go about it? What was your anthropological method? There was no participatory observation possible, as there was in your Middle East studies.

That was clear from the start. I did get into a few banks a few times, because people took risks and pretended they didn't know who I was. But broadly speaking, it meant meeting people from the tribe outside the village and asking them what was going on in the village. So that's primarily research into how people see themselves and others rather than into what actually goes on, because what actually goes on is shrouded in fog.

Is that what the code of silence is for? They don't want to talk about what financial business is actually about?

It's more complicated than that. Say you're a pension fund for steelworkers, and you're investing. You're working with this assets manager from a firm in London who invests money for you because they're specialized in Asian stocks. And then you suddenly read an article about the people you invest with, and they're saying a few controversial things. Then your boss will call you and ask, "Are you working with these people? What's going on?" So it creates tension. And remember, there are many areas where you're not allowed to speak with the press. This also applies for civil servants, and even for journalists working for newspapers.

What did you want to know about the City tribe?

When I took up the assignment, I had two main questions. Primarily, I wanted to know: Who are these people? The other question was: Can it happen again? Because in 2008, when Lehman Brothers collapsed, we were really very close to a comprehensive collapse of Western civilization that would have had irreversible consequences. It would have been like if your blood circulation is interrupted: even if it's only for a few minutes, your body will never recover. That really was in the cards when Lehman collapsed: suddenly the whole system was threatening to fall apart. You're talking about empty supermarkets and petrol stations, riots, the whole works. So my two main questions were: Can it happen again? And: Who are these people who brought this on? How do they see themselves, and what do they do all day?

> *Let's start with that last question and then come back at the end to the question of whether it can happen again. So what do they do all day long at work?*

Really different things. That was the first big eye-opener to me: this is very much like the Islamic world. From the outside you can say: They're all Muslims, so pick up a copy of the Koran and work out who they are, and that's it. But when you zoom in, you realize the Muslim world is very complicated. You've got Arabs and non-Arabs, and then there are Arabs who are not Muslims, and then there are Muslims who are not Arabs. And very soon that very confident sense of overview, of control, falls away, when you realize: Ah, this world is vast, and vastly diverse. The same is true of the financial world. And a lot of people inside it are really angry at what's been happening, because they feel they have nothing to do with it, and still they're paying the price, both in terms of the resulting economic downturn and reputation-wise. Because they're blamed by outsiders for something they had no part in.

> *But some of the people were to blame for the crash?*

Yes, but one of the most terrifying discoveries was how few of them were actually involved. If you look at London as a whole, depending on who you include, the population of the financial world is between a quarter of a million and a third, between 250,000 and 350,000. If maybe 5,000 of these

people were directly involved in the subprime lending nets, that would be a generous estimate.

These were the people who were to blame for the banking crisis?

That's hard to say. The really tempting analysis is that they knew what they were doing and they were willingly betting the house, knowing that at some point it would come down, and also knowing that the taxpayer would pay. But if you talk to the actual people, most of them were not so much evil as deluded. They weren't lying to us, they were lying to themselves. There's been very interesting research about where people involved in subprime nets invested their bonuses. And quite a few invested their bonuses either in their own banks or in the kinds of products they were selling. They really believed in them.

This is where it gets interesting theoretically. The underlying model in all economic theories, and the view of human nature under most proposed solutions for the crisis, is that humans are rational actors. These solutions so far assume that human beings act rationally, that they have full information – they know what they're doing – and what we need to do is to change the incentives. And sure, the incentives – the bonuses, et cetera – are all wrong in finance. But I believe there's a deeper problem, that even if you tweak all the incentives and make sure that the interests of the taxpayer, the shareholder, the bank as a whole are all aligned – even then, there's a vast risk of another crisis. Because people lie to themselves. And often, they simply choose not to know. There's a really good term for this from the Swedish sociologist Mats Alvesson: functional stupidity.

It's the kind of stupidity one needs in order to survive in a complex bureaucratic environment. The book I'm currently writing is, to a large degree, about functional stupidity. There's a lot of functional stupidity in journalism. If there's an airplane crash and the journalists fly out, and a few hours later they're on TV, of course they have no idea what's really been going on. But functional stupidity dictates that you pretend you know everything. In a bank there are many instances of this phenomenon. And I find this really frightening. This is why we can't design a system of regulations that will prevent a crash like the one we had. All we can do is design a financial system that can withstand the inevitable regulatory failure. Regulation will not

be able to control banks that are staffed by people who lie to themselves. That's why we need to have smaller and simpler banks.

So there are 5,000 people doing the hardcore business. What do the other 300,000 financial workers do?

Some of them are venture capitalists, so they seek out entrepreneurs with a great idea or small businesses with a potential for growth, and then they try to get investors interested in investing in these businesses and grow them really hard in order to sell them after a few years. And then there's private equity, where you buy existing companies and then strip them or reorganize them and then sell them again. Then there's insurance – vast companies, because everything is insured and then reinsured, because insurances also insure themselves. This is big business. You have to tailor all the contracts between people who want to take on the risk and the people who are running the risks. But the premiums paid by those different parties are reinvested. So the insurers are also big investors.

And then there's the area of asset management. All those pension funds, all those university endowments, and all these rich individuals – all this wealth needs to be invested. And then there's corporate finance: big corporations and governments that need to borrow money, and they need a bank to organize that, because they can't do it themselves. And then there's mergers and acquisitions: you take over other companies, or you sell a subsidiary. And then there's the area of financial markets. They don't only sell stocks but also currencies and interest-rate products and commodities, and there's an insane range of commodities, from oil to cotton to whatever. So it's genuinely vast. And the first step is to take in how vast it is. And that's terrifying, because who knows in how many of the niches I just mentioned a bomb could go off similar to the one that went off when subprime collapsed?

The picture you get as an outsider is usually of shouting men on the TV screen when the stock exchange crashes. But to some extent, that's only a tiny part of it. And the stock market is not the only barometer of the economy; it's just a very small part of it. There are these deep cultural archetypes, like Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street*, Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, Richard Gere in *Pretty Woman* and the "Masters of the Universe" in Tom Wolfe's novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. But actually, if you look closer, most

of these figures aren't bankers; Richard Gere in *Pretty Woman* isn't a banker, and neither is Gordon Gekko. Again, the analogy for me with the Middle East is striking – how most outsiders have a sense of Islam made up of notions like the blowing up of a girls' school by the Taliban, female circumcision in Egypt, and hand-chopping in Saudi Arabia, and that combines into something like the crazy fighting Muslim. That's what outsiders do with finance, too.

Let's take a closer look at these people working in the banking system. What do they do during the day?

They work double-full time. One of the problems is that they overdo it at work. Most of them, even the ones in support functions – and most of them are in support functions, because for every proper banker there are a few support people – all of them work more than they'd need to in similar jobs. Because if you're in HR, IT or even the legal department, you might as well do this work elsewhere. Most of them say they make ten to twenty percent more than they would in a different industry but that they also work ten to twenty percent more. But that's the support function. The actual bankers, they work and they work and they work. This, I think, is one of the problems: that they're living in a bubble and they're surrounded by people who live in the same bubble. They usually marry someone from that bubble, and over time I think they lose touch with the rest of society.

So there's a social structure within the bubble, and then there's the rest of the world. This allows us to look at them as a tribe. How are the relationships within this tribe organized? Is that strictly hierarchic, or is there anything like a network of friends, and if so, how does that come about?

We're talking about a pretty big tribe. There are subfamilies. And it's striking how, for these people's identity, if you see it as comprised of a number of signifiers, it matters what bank you're in. If you're with Goldman Sachs, Deutsche Bank or J.P. Morgan, you're at the top of the hierarchy. If you're with ING or some Belgian bank, you're at the bottom. That's important.

Then there's the activity you're in: are you in trading and financial markets, or are you in dealmaking, or are you – I'm talking here about a big bank – in asset management? Again, that's a huge difference. If you're in trading, your day starts when the market opens, or actually a little before that, because of course you have to be ready. Your day is structured by events on the market. If you're in asset management – that is, investing long-term for clients – then of course the markets are important, but you're not buying or selling every ten seconds. You may decide to invest in shares for nine months. So you usually keep an eye on the market, but you're probably involved in either research or client meetings. And then there's dealmaking – corporate finance, and mergers and acquisitions, and organizing big financial loans for companies and governments or taking over other companies. There, the financial markets are very far away, because you're not trying to persuade certain clients to buy or sell something. That also means that if you see a banker at lunch hour having a big lunch, you know he's not in financial markets, because financial markets means lunch at your screen. These types are very, very different. Advisory hates financial markets, financial markets hate advisory. They both completely look down on asset management. That's really important.

And then there's the kind of subactivity you're in. It makes a big difference whether, in dealmaking, you're in media and technology, which is very hot with Twitter, et cetera, or whether you're in, say, banking for Europe. If you're following banking stocks in Europe as a dealmaker, well, ever since the Lehman crisis, basically banks have had to be nationalized, and there haven't been public listings and offerings and so on, so that's a very boring area. If you're a dealmaker, that's like running the marathon with a group. It's a long-term expedition, maybe somewhat like the explorers in the seventeenth century; you're away for months, effectively. Which is very different from if you're trading on the financial markets and you just sit down and fight all day for a number on the screen, and then when the markets close, it's over. Another big difference: if you're in trading, it really matters whether you're trading for outside clients who call you to trade or whether you're trading the bank's money. And then it really matters if you're in commodities or in interest rates.

Initially, when I'd sit down and somebody would say, "I'm a flow derivatives trader at a bulge-bracket bank, director level," that would be complete

gobbledygook for me. I would have no idea what they were saying. But over time, I began to realize that they were locating themselves in this complex field. What he was saying was: I'm in flow trading, so I trade when clients call me to buy or sell something, and I do it for them; and then it's derivatives, so it's a particular kind of financial product; and I'm doing that at a bulge-bracket bank, which means it's one of the top banks, in the top bracket of the list of banks; and then at director level, which is when you're in your mid-thirties and you make about half a million a year. These titles are all ranked; there are league tables for everything. And this is real life for a banker.

These levels are a function of the amount of money they're earning?

No, it's the other way around. The levels come with a particular financial package, usually, though people in similar functions make very different amounts, depending on what's negotiated. Your package is all tailor-made. I think that sometimes people will take a pay cut in order to go to Goldman Sachs, for example. Or they're at Goldman Sachs but in a relatively junior function, and then ING comes over and says, "We'll allow you to make a huge jump, and you'll make double your current salary" – but of course you'll go to ING and ING looks silly, and Goldman Sachs means really smart. People are constantly weighing these things, and there's a whole industry of recruiters constantly sounding people out about whether they're happy in their current job or want to make a move, telling them about such-and-such a bank, where they're thinking about expanding into the area they're good at. And since everyone is ranked in those league tables, everybody knows where they are and their relative market value, and a lot of time is spent on working out what your current position in the league might be worth. I think on the whole it's a misunderstanding to think that it's about money; I think it's primarily, for bankers, a status game, and the amount of money they make marks their position in the hierarchy. An Olympic athlete doesn't do it for the actual gold medal; the Olympic athlete wants to stand on a podium, hear the anthem and think, "I was the fastest swimmer of all." And then a lot of money comes in, and the money can validate the whole game, but it's ultimately about being the fastest, the smartest, the most successful person.

If they're going up in the hierarchy, what does that do to their lifestyle? How do they show they have this higher status, other than in functional terms? Is it a matter of clothing, or what?

Yes – and this is really important – it's about where you live in London, and how you live, where you send your children to school, the clothes you wear, the kind of holidays you take. I've had quite a few conversations with recruiters about this, because they talk a lot about financial management, and basically you have to constantly signal and telegraph to your superiors that you are hundred percent committed. The way you do this is by essentially spending everything. You send your children to the most expensive school within your means, you go on the most extravagant holiday you can, you live in the most expensive house you can, because by doing so, you signal, "Yes, I'm in it for the long run. I'll do anything in order to keep my job, and to grow."

So if you're with Goldman Sachs and you're sending your children to this cute Montessori state school in Hackney, then basically you're sending the signal: I'm hedging my bets, I'm not in it to the full extent. There's this kind of almost competitive conspicuous consumption that's really important to understand. And it also shows how vulnerable they are, because they have to constantly trade up in terms of lifestyle. But money comes and goes, and lifestyle stays. So if you've had a bonus, a big bonus – and usually the bonus for the top bankers is a multiple of their salary, so they have a base pay, which is maybe £150,000, and a bonus of half a million or a million – if for a few years you've had that million and then all of a sudden you don't, the whole thing collapses on you. So you'll be tempted to push the boundaries and to rip off a few clients.

This is one of the arguments for a bonus cap: to force people to live within the means dictated by the base pay rather than the bonus. The bonus is a very good idea in a financial machine, because the economy goes up and down. If you pay people well when it goes up and you don't have to pay them much when it goes down, you don't have to fire them. So the idea behind the bonus is actually very smart, but the way it's developed isn't smart at all. So now people are trapped in a lifestyle, and in London – in Holland and Germany you're very fortunate, because there are good state schools – but here, and especially in secondary school, state schools are shit. If you

have your children in a private school, and you know that if you're fired you'll have to take them out of that school, you'll have to take them out of your house and move, effectively you'll have to uproot your entire social existence, and you know you can be fired in five minutes, well, you're not going to rock the boat.

I see. So the code of silence isn't that difficult to keep.

No, it isn't.

What's it like to live on top of the world, so to speak, while knowing you can be fired in five minutes? What does that do to people?

This is a difficult issue. Part of the book I'm currently writing is one long attack on Tom Wolfe and his "Masters of the Universe" trope, because I think it fundamentally misunderstands the position of the banker and makes the banker out to be something he's not but would very much like to be. They're not at all masters of the universe; they're not even masters of their own fate. Because they can be out the door within five minutes. But they like to believe they're masters of the universe, and they're in total and complete denial about the fact that they can be fired in five minutes. So all the ones who hadn't been fired would tell me, "Look, only those who don't perform properly are fired." But the ones who'd just gotten fired would say, "It's incredible; I was just laid off. There was no recourse, no nothing. I was just – *boom*. This is what the banks are like. There's no loyalty." So again, people are lying to themselves about their vulnerability, and then the outside world comes and says, "You're the Masters of the Universe."

How is it possible that they can be fired in five minutes?

That's because Tony Blair, who's a Tory who went to work for the Labour Party, negotiated an exemption from the EU labor directive. Across Europe, you can't be fired in five minutes, but in the financial sector in London you can. I spoke to an internal auditor – someone who's like the internal military police, but for the banks; they investigate fraud and big disruptions and that sort of thing – and she said, "You know, if you look at the degree of coop-

eration and you map that out on the degree of job security, they coincide entirely." So in Europe, during an investigation when there's been a problem, you arrive, and people give you all the files. In England, they sabotage you, but not terribly. In America, they don't even open the door for you, and that's your own bank. And the reason is that in America you can be fired in one minute, and there's no protection whatsoever. In London, it's five minutes, and then you'll probably get a severance package; still, people are terrified here. In Germany and in France, there's far more trust, because employees have a long-term relationship with their bank.

This is something I think we, as Europeans, really need to understand. That our financial center is run according to a completely different logic from how the rest of Europe operates. But the City is imposing that logic on us. So every time a country makes it easier for companies to fire their employees, every time that country becomes a little bit more like the London financial sector, the London financial sector says, "Well, then we'll upgrade this country, because now it's more competitive." The financial sector, in a way, and I think not really consciously, is reshaping the entire economy in its own image.

What motivates people to want to be part of the financial word? What's the basic drive?

I think ultimately the drive is the thrill of the game, of having an outcome that's unambiguous: you win or you lose. In the markets you can actually measure how much you've won. Which is very different from working in the UN or some bureaucratic governmental institution. And then there's this sense of "I'm fighting with the best; I'm holding my own in a shark tank." This is really important. And then there's the trap of having a lifestyle and knowing that you can never maintain that lifestyle outside of finance. There's also a promise of a life-changing reward in the future, that maybe some monster client will decide to do business with your bank, and your bank and you will be associated with that deal, and so for years you'll make a incredible amount of money.

And then there's just inertia. You're already working so many hours that it's really hard to go find another job. So there are a lot of reasons. But quite a few people would just say, "Look, the money is so good, and it's just so

tempting." I've interviewed a few people who had just left and then after about a year went back in. So I looked them up again, and they were all saying, "Well, you know, I tried to become a documentary filmmaker," "I tried to write a book," or something. And of course they discovered that at 38, if you're just beginning to write a book or just beginning as a documentary filmmaker, you're starting all the way at the bottom. You make no money; nobody wants an interview; nobody thinks you're interesting. And they know they have this very specific skill to do with a particular kind of derivative, and if they put that skill to use in a bank, with all the sacrifices that entails, they'll suddenly make insane amounts of money, and they'll gain a kind of status.

Even in the UK, where there are a lot of banks, especially in London, if you say, "I'm in finance, and this is my huge house, and there's my big car," most people will say, "Wow, you're cool." So in spite of all the anger and outrage about finance, I think that if you have a lot of money you'll almost win every discussion. It's a pretty materialistic … Non-pecuniary values are not very strong these days.

Do they have any long-term vision? What are they dreaming about when they go into this expensive lifestyle? What's their vision of where they want to go?

I've found there's a difference between why they go in and why people stay in. When they go in, they often have a huge student debt, or they've always been told that it's fantastic, or they went to business school and at business school everybody said, "If you work for Goldman Sachs, you're the smartest guy in the room." There aren't many books or films that accurately depict what it's like in those banks. So I think people have no idea, but they see the money and they see a challenge. And then they either get out after a few years – either they're burned out or they decide to go into private equity or hedge funds or those sort of things.

If they stay in, I think over time they get sucked into a lifestyle; they get sucked into a bubble. If you have to work really hundred hours a week for a few years, then there's not much of a social life left for you anyway. So most of your friends will be in finance, too. It's a bit like a cult, a sect. You're slowly roped in. And then you realize: If I'm going to have to work very

hard the rest of my life anyway, then I might as well do it in a sector that pays really well. And I have these skills and would have to retrain if I left. And I'm actually doing something really useful. Because a lot of people in finance do do something useful. It's really important that money or capital goes to the most efficiently run businesses. That's why North Korea doesn't work and why Europe does work. So they feel they're doing useful work, are being well paid, and over time they choose.

There are different degrees of competiveness. Some people would head for the top; others would say, "You know, I'm quite happy where I am." And a lot of them, at around forty, get out and go work for a corporation. Corporations really like to have bankers in their dealings with bankers. If Shell has to buy and sell a lot of companies, they'll hire a former mergers-and-acquisitions banker to do it for them. And then at Shell of course they're still doing mergers and acquisitions, but only for Shell. So you maybe do two a year, rather than constantly doing a lot of them.

When it comes to their dreams … there's this receding horizon. I spoke to people in the age range from 21 to 45. Some of them were trying to get in; others had just left. All of them had this point on the horizon that seemed to move with the increase in their salary, in their pay. If they were 21, they said, "I just want to pay off my student debt." If they were 25, they said, "If I hang on a few more years, I'll suddenly make a lot more." Because at some point, the salary increase jumps. And then when they're there, they already have their eye on more. What happens is that money starts out as a means to an end. A lot of people talked about ending up working for an NGO, and having all sorts of entrepreneurial ideas, and they just needed money and training to realize that dream. And then, over time, money changes shape. It's no longer a means to an end; it becomes the end. And then, of course, money you can never have enough of. It's very tempting to move it up and say, "I'll stay a few more years." "One more bonus" is a very common term.

It's hard, if you're making £1 million a year, and you know you have a skill that's worth effectively almost nothing in the rest of the economy, and your friends live the same lifestyle that comes with £1 million a year, to actually step out and to know that if you're no longer part of that world, your whole conversational toolkit will be empty. You'll have nothing to talk about with these people anymore, because you talk about work all the time.

And work in finance is really interesting, because it's a bit like how journalists talk about the world. Journalists are also constantly trying to find novel interpretations of existing information and new information. And that's what many bankers do. The difference is that we put them in the paper and they put them into investment advice, but it's the same kind of mindset. You can always know more. Discussions are not purely about CDOs or something. It's usually about: What do we think a possible Republican victory in the next Congressional election could mean for the political balance in the US, and what would this mean for technology companies? Or: What are the secondary effects of the Fed's decision to continue creating new money on the oil market?

I think eighty percent of the conversations of journalists and financial people are probably the same. It's just the last twenty percent that we do different things with. If you step out of that world and you're no longer involved, you're no longer fed that same kind of very high-quality research. It's as some people said: finance isn't a job; it's an identity. To break with that identity is almost like stepping out of a religious cult. It's very, very hard and enormously damaging.

What's their greatest fear?

I think the loss of status. They've been pulled into this world that promises them unequivocal status. I had a number of regulars, insiders, who would comment on the interviews in the comment thread of my *Guardian* blog. Whenever I published a new interview, they would give their views, which was really interesting. Some people kept this up for a year and a half – two years now. I found that with them, and also with others, what they hated most was if I pitied them. If I got really angry and wrote, "You 'masters of the universe,' you've treated us so badly, how can you do this?" that was fine – they just laughed at it, because they were still at the top of the pyramid. But if I said, "Yes, I think you need a hug, because you have a working disorder and a money addiction, and it affects your brain to such an extent that you can no longer think rationally about your own interests and those of your family; if I can help you, perhaps with counseling, maybe we could have a financial transaction tax and pay for counseling for all you people" – that would really, really annoy people. That entailed loss of status.

The question connected to this fear is, of course, the second question you were investigating in your research: Can it happen again, a collapse like Lehman's, or an even bigger one? Based on your observations, what's your answer?

It will happen again. Without a doubt. What I didn't sufficiently realize before was how new the current setup of finance is. In the 1970s, finance wasn't lucrative, and it wasn't glamorous, and it wasn't controversial. And also, in the US people wanted to work for IBM. IBM was a very different company then. IBM hired people for life. IBM has changed a lot; now you can be fired at IBM in five minutes. Banks changed. And then there was massive deregulation. There was globalization, which meant that if you wanted to compete with bigger banks, especially the European ones, you had to merge with other banks and become bigger. You had all these mergers, where banks became bigger and bigger and bigger. Then there were lots of new technologies, which allowed for very new products that simply didn't exist forty years ago, and couldn't have existed.

Like derivatives.

Derivatives are very old, but not the complex ones we have today. The new technology also allowed for the calculation of future profits in a way that was impossible before. Say an airline in Africa wants to sell tickets in advance for April, but they have no idea what the oil price in April is going to be. If they just sell tickets and then the oil price goes up, they'll go bust, because they've already sold the tickets much too cheap. So what they do is they buy derivatives. They buy a product that says: we guarantee you that you can buy oil at this price. And so they eliminate a risk. This is extremely useful. It's a good example of how important financial products are. We couldn't have long-term planning, we couldn't have globalization, and we couldn't have the kind of specialization and the division of labor we have without these financial products. They're fantastic.

But in the wrong hands, they turn on themselves, and they turn on us. Say a pension fund wants to be protected against a certain risk for ten years. For ten years, the bank guarantees a certain price for that pension fund. Now if that runs for ten years, the bank of course gets its premium, it makes

money from offering that guarantee, and so the banker who sold that product to the pension fund could say to his bank, "Look, this is going to make you money for ten years. So I want my bonus to reflect those ten years." Suddenly that bonus becomes huge. That's a kind of dynamic that simply didn't exist forty years ago, when basically it was all about the stock exchange. And the stock exchange … How are you ever going to project ten years of revenue into the future? You're trying to get people to buy stocks, and then they pay you a commission when you buy or sell for them.

Nostalgia is really pointless here. We've progressed into a completely different era. If you look at the bank, if you look at the zero loyalty, zero job security, the possibility of life-changing rewards, and then technical and financial opacity … Many of these products and many of these systems are so complex and opaque that it's very difficult for outsiders to work out what they do, and in many ways it's simply impossible. Nobody can predict beyond a certain level of complexity. And if you know that the bank is too big to fail, so their top people know, first it's the shareholder who takes the hit, but ultimately it's the taxpayer who saves the bank, because the consequences are too horrible if it fails … If you add all these together, you just have a recipe for another explosion.

It won't be the same kind of explosion it was last time, because, you know, the regulators are like generals; they're always trying to fight the last war. Their aim is to prevent a recurrence of the last crisis. So it's probably going to be something quite different. We don't know what it will be. That's one reason why there are no solutions. And that's why we haven't had any kind of structural change or even the promise of structural change: because nobody has a comprehensive vision of what a fundamentally different and more stable financial structure would look like.

I see. And who will be the victim? The banks or the states? Or both?

The taxpayers. But then again … I think the banks are unjustifiably singled out. The reason the 2008 crisis was such a big disaster was not because bankers put all our money on black and then the number fell on red. It was because so many people borrowed far too much money, spent it and then couldn't pay it back. They were in every conceivable way encouraged to do so, but still, they did. A lot of Americans and a lot of Brits lied about their

income. A crisis without either companies, governments or individuals borrowing too much is very difficult. We had one with the dot-com bubble, when a lot of people invested in shares and the shares collapsed, but that was fine, because they didn't invest with borrowed money.

With the subprime mess, people used borrowed money; they spent it, and then when they couldn't pay it back, there was a huge crisis. The idea that this was just the banks was very convenient for all those who'd borrowed too much money; the politicians, who'd helped to create this bubble; and the central bankers, who'd also contributed a lot. That's why I think the outcome of the crisis – and it's so pernicious – is that the banks are taking all the blame, even though all the insiders know that they were just one factor, but in exchange, nobody really takes on the banks. And that's terrible.

The politicians, certainly in Britain … it's just terrible. The Labour government has been the biggest accomplice of the financial sector. And now that they're the opposition, they're not saying a thing, because they know that as soon as they extend their criticism beyond the banks, everybody will say, "Well, shall we quote a few speeches that Gordon Brown and Tony Blair made in the years leading up to the crisis?" When they basically said, "You financial people are fantastic. Regulation is silly. Do whatever you like." This is why it really gets scary: because basically the political system is either neutered or complicit.

Is the same process of functional stupidity at work here?

Functional stupidity is when you know better but prefer to be stupid, and with politicians … It's hard to go back to the pre-Lehman times, when everybody used to say, "It's a new paradigm; it's a new era; it's financial innovation. We now have these instruments that allow for a completely different way to disperse and spread risk, and that's why we have these huge profits. These profits don't reflect a higher risk; they just reflect an increase in productivity." It's a bit like the way people now talk about quantitative easing and outright monetary purchases – in other words, credit creation. Our central banks have been creating hundreds of billions of pounds and dollars, and everybody sort of goes along with it. You'll rarely find coherent criticism coming out of the political sphere. It's like they're saying, "Well, apparently they know what they're doing. It still pays the bills. I'm sure it's

all right." I think the current generation of politicians, unless they come from the financial sector, simply have no clue. The ones who were in charge before were very well rewarded for their stupidity. Tony Blair now makes two and a half million at J.P. Morgan, and if you look at ex-government leaders Zalm and Wijn and Kok in Holland, who went to work for one of the financial services providers …

There's really something like a ruling class again?

Yes; you wish it was a conspiracy, but I think it's also globalization. Finance is now organized globally, and politics operates locally. As a politician, you have to organize a response at a local level or a national level or a regional level, but finance can just play you off against other regions. And they can capture and co-opt and buy the individual politicians who would have to organize that response. Markets and players in those markets have become so big, they're effectively more powerful and liquid, and so they can operate more effectively than governments or even groups of governments like the EU.

But when I asked you if it could happen again, you said yes, it will. That means there's no organization, either political or in finance, that can prevent it or steer it in another direction?

I don't see one. As Western taxpayers, we are in a sense now being treated the way the Asian taxpayer was treated in the Asian crisis at the end of the 1990s. And the way many taxpayers, or at least citizens, in the third world were treated by big finance all through the 1970s and 1980s. We're now getting a taste of our own medicine. But we still have a far better life than people in the developing world, and I think that the amount of money creation being accomplished by quantitative easing is basically robbing poor people, because what we're doing is creating many more euros and many more dollars and many more pounds, and poor countries have amassed all these pounds and euros as a kind of insurance against the future, the way historically people would collect gold. And what we're doing now is debasing that money. We've bought their stuff with euros, and now we're creating lots and lots and lots of euros, so that the money we used to pay, and which they still

hold, is now worth less and less. I can't really see demonstrations or the Occupy movement or anyone protesting against this development, because hey, all this money creation pays our bills and sustains our lifestyle. If a Martian were to look at the world and see how unjust it is and then have to decide for each human being to what degree they're a victim and to what degree they're complicit, I think the average Western taxpayer would end up on the side of the complicit ones, the ones who still benefit far more than they suffer from the status quo. I think that politicians – those in the know, because there are smart politicians – have accepted this. They've said, "Look, the big banks are a geopolitical asset; they're what the colonies used to be." If you listen to the justifications in the UK about the financial sector, it's really very similar to how the colonial system must have been justified. "It's not pretty what we're doing in Sudan, but it brings in a lot of money, and that pays for hospitals and schools."

> *Did the people you spoke to in the City tribe have trouble with their conscience?*

Yes. That was one of the reasons for them to come forward and talk to me.

> *What are they worried about?*

They worry about a new collapse.

> *I mean, is it because they personally stole money, so to speak, from poor people, or is it from being part of the system?*

They didn't steal, because what they do is not against the law. They may sell a financial product to a pension fund and know that the pension fund doesn't quite understand the financial product and that they're ripping it off, but it's not stealing. That's a really important difference, because as long as we keep on focusing on lawbreaking, we don't see that the real problem is now that the laws themselves are to blame. And then, of course, a lot of the financial people aren't involved at all in ripping off clients; they do actually do useful work. I think a lot of them are worried, but they're also saying – the ones I spoke to, and of course there's a bias there, because they

had to volunteer, and that will attract a particular kind of person or personality – but they would say, "Look, I'm not stupid. If my bank offers me £300,000 a year, I'm going to take it. What do you want me to do?"

I think there are pangs of conscience, similar to yours and mine and the readers' when it comes to CO_2 emissions. We think: Yes, I accept climate science, and I know we should cap our CO_2 emissions drastically. But then there's this fantastic little trip to a beautiful European city, and then there's this very nice steak that I can eat, and I know that if I don't eat it someone else will. And I know that, socially, if I start living the kind of life that comes with a sustainable carbon footprint, basically all my friends will look at me and begin to think I'm a bit of a bore, sort of a moral crusader. And so we think, Yes, I know the system is unsustainable, I know I'm complicit, but I also know that unless there's structural change, nothing will happen anyway, and so on an individual level I just go along.

Is anything like structural change possible? Basically, you're suggesting it won't happen.

I think the only hope is for political change. But it would have to be global, because if you have global finance, you need global regulation. But that has to be underpinned by a credible global political process, and I don't even want a global government – if only because, if there's a global government, then who guarantees that this global government won't be captured by finance the way national governments have been captured? That has been, for me, the most shocking outcome of this research: that if I reason through all the steps, the conclusion for me is that globalization and democracy do not go together. They're not compatible, and I never realized this. In the 1990s, I was among those who thought globalization would be fantastic: it would stabilize the world, end conflicts between nations. I'm beginning to see that in the beginning it did, but that over time globalization is creating its own set of problems, which may even be worse than what we had. Or at least of a completely different nature but still enormously problematic.

But I'm still optimistic. I used to work in Egypt, and I've seen how dictatorships try to solve problems, which is to deny them until the very, very last moment and then impose a solution that hasn't been properly debated, so the solution is probably not the best one possible, and there's no buy-in,

no support. That's far worse than the system we have. Now, as a journalist – that's my job – I try to convince people, one mind at a time, of the need for change. I think it would be worse if we were to now impose change without thorough debate and the necessary support, because change will come with a lot of unintended consequences. People need to first see the necessity, and that means books, articles, talks. I'm just working away, and many others are too, and at some point young politicians will go to their leaders and begin to say, "Look, unless you can give me some real answers, we need a very different kind of policy."

Lewis Hyde (b. 1945) is the author of the modern classic "The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World" (1983). It became a cult book for an entire generation of American artists and writers who felt trapped in an art market and literary system that made it nearly impossible for them to survive without taking on odd jobs that parasitized their artistic talents. In "The Gift," Hyde proposes to look at art and poetry not as product-making activities but as a way of gift-1making and -giving, as a way to "pay back" for the gift of artistic talent. In the essay in this book he looks back at what's changed since 1983. Lewis Hyde is a poet, essayist, translator and cultural critic with a particular interest in the public life of the imagination. A MacArthur Fellow and former director of undergraduate creative writing at Harvard University, Hyde teaches in the fall at Kenyon College, where he is the Richard L. Thomas Professor of Creative Writing. During the rest of the year, he lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he is a faculty associate at Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. His other publications include "Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art" (1998) and "Common as Air: Revolution, Art and Ownership" (2010).

on being good ancestors

Lewis Hyde

Since my book *The Gift* appeared in 1983, I have sometimes been asked to speak to the puzzle of supporting creative work in the present moment. My current response to that question has several parts, the least obvious of which may be this: I've come to believe that, when it comes to how we imagine and organize support for creative work, the pivotal event in my lifetime was the 1989 fall of the Soviet Union. To expand on that assertion, it will help to begin by restating two of *The Gift*'s motivating assumptions.

The first is simply that there are categories of human enterprise that are not well organized or supported by market forces. Family life, religious life, public service, pure science, and of course much artistic practice: none of these operates very well when framed simply in terms of exchange value. The second assumption follows: any community that values these things will find nonmarket ways to organize them. It will develop gift-exchange institutions dedicated to their support.

Take the example of pure science, that is to say, science that puzzles over questions whose answers can have no obvious utility. What is the shape of the planetary orbits? What is the sequence of the inert parts of the human genome? The funding for pure science cannot come simply from those who hope for future income. Sir Isaac Newton answered the question about planetary orbits while supported by Trinity College, Cambridge. He was elected a Fellow there in 1667, a position that entitled him to wages, a room, and the use of the library. He later became the Lucasian Professor, a sinecure that remained intact even when he moved to London and ceased to teach and lecture. In London, the king eventually extended his patronage, making Newton Warden and then Master of the Mint, a lucrative appointment. As for the sequencing of the human genome, commercial science played a role but its aims were quite particular. The genome is vast, and the profit-seeking

wing of the sequencing enterprise balkanized the territory, looking only for the profitable sites. The fullness of the genome was described only by the public Human Genome Project, and that was supported by philanthropic gifts (mostly from the Wellcome Trust in England) and by government funding (mostly the National Institutes of Health in the United States). Not surprisingly, the institutions that support such noncommercial enterprises will change over time. If we tire of the focused patronage of an established church, we may separate church and state and give a tax exemption to all denominations. If we don't like royal patronage, we may turn to private philanthropy. If the privately endowed colleges serve only the elite, we may turn to state and community colleges supported by the public purse. More broadly, where church or crown or private endowments do not meet our needs, we may turn to what might be called "democratic patronage." Public education, public hospitals, public libraries, pure science, the arts, and the humanities: in the last century, all of these have been underwritten by democratic communities that tax themselves to support things of value that would not otherwise thrive.

Which brings me back to the fall of the Soviet Union, for it was the cold war that energized much of the public funding devoted to art and science in the decades after the Second World War. In my own country at least (and I must confine my remarks to the American case, that being the only one I know well), these were the years when our leaders felt called upon to show off the liberal, capitalist state, and contrast its vitality with the banality of the Eastern bloc. Neutral nations and Eastern-bloc dissidents were meant to see the remarkable energy and innovation that the West's freedoms produced. In the case of support for the arts, the energizing distinction was well expressed in a 1952 *New York Times Magazine* essay by the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr: "The modern artists' nonconformity and love of freedom cannot be tolerated within a monolithic tyranny and modern art is useless for the dictator's propaganda."

The history of this period of what I now think of as "democratic-propaganda patronage" falls into at least three phases, a series of responses to the question that Barr used as the title of his essay, "Is Modern Art Communistic?" Barr argued the negative, setting American freedom and nonconformity against the Soviets' totalizing impulse, but his position held no sway in the U.S. Congress. Elected officials in the United States regularly attacked

the arts ("All modern art is Communistic," declared one Missouri congressman) and when the U.S. State Department tried to include artwork in its cultural diplomacy the Congress directly undercut the effort. The exemplary moment came in 1947, when an exhibition of modern painting called "Advancing American Art" (including work by Georgia O'Keeffe and Arshile Gorky) traveled to Europe, first to Paris and then to Prague, where the Russians felt called upon to mount a rival exhibition. They needn't have bothered, for the exhibition was sufficiently opposed at home, described in Congress as having been assembled by "the Communists and their New Deal fellow travelers." The tour was canceled and the artwork sold as surplus government property at 5 percent of its value.[1]

Thus did Phase One of postwar cultural support really begin, the covert phase, for when Congress failed to support American cultural propaganda, the CIA stepped in. As the director of the CIA's International Organizations Division later remarked of one congressional opponent: "He made it very difficult to get Congress to go along with some of the things that we wanted to do – send art abroad, send symphonies abroad, publish magazines abroad, whatever. That's one of the reasons why it had to be done covertly … In order to encourage openness we had to be secret."

What the CIA actually managed to do has been told in Frances Stonor Saunders's book, *The Cultural Cold War*, which describes at length the interlocking structures of cultural and political power found in the United States in the 1950s. Nelson Rockefeller was well connected to both worlds and so played a key role. He had been, for example, wartime head of the intelligence agency for Latin America, and that agency, in turn, had sponsored touring exhibitions of contemporary American painting, tours that were mostly organized by the Museum of Modern Art, where Rockefeller also served variously as trustee, treasurer, president, and chairman of the board. The 1950s CIA was particularly keen on Abstract Expressionism, which Rockefeller himself famously described as "free enterprise painting." As one agency staffer later reported, "We recognized that this was the kind of art that did not have anything to do with socialist realism, and made socialist realism look even more stylized and more rigid and confined." Not that there was ever any direct support to artists like Jackson Pollock, or any formal agreements between the CIA and the museums. "For matters of this

sort", the staffer goes on to say, it "could only have been done through the organizations or the operations of the CIA at two or three removes."

As for "the organizations," the most famous was the Congress of Cultural Freedom, which covertly sponsored a highbrow intellectual journal, *Encounter*; paid the expenses of American and European intellectuals to attend international conferences; and supported the foreign distribution of American literary and cultural journals such as *Partisan Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Hudson Review*, and *Sewanee Review.* In the early 1960s, when the *Kenyon Review* was edited by Robie Macauley, its circulation jumped from two thousand to six thousand. Macauley had actually worked for the CIA before he took over the *Review* from its founding editor, John Crowe Ransom, and was later to boast that he had "found ways of making money that Mr. Ransom had never thought of."

This period of covert arts funding came to an end with the Soviets' successful launch of the first earth-orbiting satellite, and with the election of John F. Kennedy as U.S. president. Ever since the end of the Second World War, the government had been supporting scientific research, largely through the universities, but that funding broadened significantly after Sputnik and became an overt part of the nation's self-advertising, all of which eased the way for similar support to the arts and humanities. President Kennedy in turn was a politician disposed to support the kind of open cultural diplomacy that had disappeared a decade earlier. He invited Robert Frost to read at his inauguration and later, at the Frost Library in Amherst, defended American cultural freedoms in terms of the standard opposition to communist oppressions, extolling the artist as the "last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state." After Pablo Casals played his cello at the White House, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., declared the event "of obvious importance … in transforming the world's impression of the United States as a nation of money-grubbing materialists. "

Such was the philosophy that guided the next quarter-century of public patronage, a period when Democrats and Republicans read from the same play book. Lyndon Johnson, impressed with the goodwill Kennedy received for supporting the arts, signed the law that brought the National Endowment for the Arts into being. Richard Nixon doubled its budget. All deployed the rhetoric of the cold war. Typical would be a remark by Gifford

Phillips, trustee of the Phillips Collection in Washington: "The artist has a special need to live outside of society ... Whenever there is an official attempt to destroy this detachment, as there has been in the Soviet Union, for example, art is likely to suffer."

Oddly, as the critic Michael Brenson points out in *Visionaries and Outcasts*, his history of the NEA visual arts program, it was always assumed that such detached and materially disinterested outsiders would never find themselves in conflict with America itself. It was as if the more "outside" the artist went, the more fully would he or she embody the transcendent values of capitalist democracy. The seemingly asocial eccentric in his cabin at the edge of town is not actually "outside" his country; quite the opposite: he inhabits the True America, the one the Soviets can never see if they focus only on the money-grubbing side of capitalism. "We are the last civilized nation on the earth to recognize that the arts and the humanities have a place in our national life," declared a New Jersey congressman in 1965. Twenty years earlier, Georgia O'Keeffe's work was sold as government surplus; now it could as easily be the emblem of civilization itself, and her studio at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico its last outpost.

The ideological anomalies of this period aside, the institutions of overt democratic patronage arose from a wisdom worth preserving. In the United States, the 1965 enabling legislation for the arts and humanities endowments spelled out worthy goals: "While no government can call a great artist or scholar into existence, it is necessary and appropriate for the federal government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent." This seems exactly right; the problem lies in the context of its expression, the long season of democratic-propaganda patronage during which, despite the well-put ideal, the arts and sciences were not supported as ends in themselves, but as players in a larger political drama.

Of that context one could say, to put it positively, that the Soviet Union turned out to provide a useful counterforce to the harsher realities of the West. It goaded Americans into provisioning those parts of social life not well served by market forces. To put it negatively, however, if Cold War rhetoric lay at the foundation, then the entire edifice was historically vulnerable. Thus after the Soviet Union fell in 1989 so did the bulk of public patronage

in the West. Complaints about government support for the arts had begun in earnest during the Reagan presidency, but funding itself actually rose in all but one year of his two terms; however, in 1989 – the first year of George H. W. Bush's presidency – attacks on funding escalated, focused on particular artists and on the supposed elitism of the funding process. In the long run, inflammatory charges of obscenity in the arts proved especially effective when joined to the call for limited government and balanced budgets, so much so that by the time Bill Clinton left office a decade later, the NEA had lost 56 percent of its annual budget, its staff had been cut in half, and nearly all grants to individual artists had been eliminated. A similar if less publicized story played out in basic science. In a 1998 interview Leon Lederman, Nobel laureate in physics, said: "We always thought, naively, that here we are working in abstract, absolutely useless research and once the cold war ended, we wouldn't have to fight for resources. Instead, we found, we were the cold war. We'd been getting all this money for quark research because our leaders decided that science, even useless science, was a component of the cold war. As soon as it was over, they didn't need science."

In short, around 1990 the third phase of this history began, an era of market triumphalism in which not only has public support of the arts and sciences begun to dry up but those who stilled their voices during the cold war, those who have long believed in an unlimited market, have felt free to advance unself-consciously.

In instance after instance, public institutions have been encouraged to think of themselves as private businesses. The universities have set up "technology transfer offices" and tried to fund themselves by selling knowledge rather than creating, preserving, and disseminating it, as their old mission statements once asked them to do. Grammar schools have learned that they can sell exclusive rights to soft drink vendors intent on creating brand loyalty in the very young. Public radio and television are now cluttered with advertising. Even commercial television has become more so: in the United States, the networks once limited their ads to nine minutes an hour; they gave that up in the last decade and ads now run eighteen minutes in prime time.

Natural abundance has been similarly commercialized, everywhere subject to the grid of artificial scarcity. Ancient aquifers, by rights belonging to all who live above them, are now pumped and packaged. Drinking water,

once an essence of life, has become a resource to be sold in brand-differentiated packaging. Broadcast spectrum, one of nature's richest gifts, has been parceled out to industry and then sold back to the public.

Our cultural abundance suffers the same fate. The ever-expanding reach of copyright has removed more and more art and ideas from the public domain. The Walt Disney Company happily built its film empire out of folk culture (*Snow White, Pinocchio*) but any folk who try to build on Disney can expect a cease and desist order in the next mail. Patents are now used to create property rights in things once thought inalienable-facts of nature, seed lines, human genes, medicines long known to indigenous cultures. A company that makes jam recently got itself a patent on the crustless peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich.

This period of market triumphalism has, in sum, seen a successful move to commercialize a long list of things once thought to have no price, and to enclose common holdings, both natural and cultural, that we used to assume no one was allowed to take private. All of which seems quite grim, but only, I think, if we forget that history brought these changes and that history continues to unfold. As I said before, gif-institutions supporting the noncommercial portion of our lives will change as the times change. None of us wants to return to the days when a great scientist had to hope the king might make him Master of the Mint, nor – if we care for the arts and sciences as ends in themselves – should we pine for the days of patronage as propaganda. If we want our institutions to have the longevity they deserve, then the commercial side of our culture needs to be met with, an indigenous counterforce, not a foreign one.

To close this excursion into matters topical and practical, then, let me point to a necessarily limited sample of places where the commercial and the noncommercial are found in better balance. A good number may be seen on the Internet, itself a post-Soviet surprise of history if there ever was one. Numerous projects on the Web have the structures and fertility of gift communities. There are many examples, from the free software movement to the donated labor supporting political blogs to the "NASA Clickworkers," a set of over eighty-five thousand anonymous, untrained volunteers who helped classify all the craters on maps of Mars.

Or take the Public Library of Science. This Web-based publishing venture has protocols reminiscent of the scientific community. Papers published

in scientific journals are called "contributions" for good reason; "They are in fact, gifts," as one theorist says, gifts to a community whose currency is the merit that a scientist acquires when her ideas are accepted and passed along. This gift ethic never extended, however, to the actual printing and distribution of scientific journals. On the contrary, the cost of subscribing to these journals has been a growing problem for many libraries (the price of publications in science rose by about 260 percent during the 1990s). A one year subscription to *The American Journal of Human Genetics* now costs over $1,000 and a good science library needs scores of such subscriptions. At current rates, poorly endowed colleges and, more importantly, the poorer nations, literally cannot afford to enter the scientific community, no matter its internal ethic of generosity.

Internet publication has provided a solution. In 2000 a group of biomedical scientists, including Nobel laureate Harold E. Varmus, began urging scientific publishers to make all research available for free distribution online. When the publishers resisted, the group simply worked around them and in 2003 launched a nonprofit Web publishing venture, the Public Library of Science. By now there are six online journals (*PLoS Biology, PLoS Medicine, PLoS Genetics,* and others). These are not Web logs or chat rooms or sites where people may post whatever they wish; they are well-edited, peer-reviewed journals publishing original research, as with traditional journals. The difference is that PLoS journals are "open access," meaning that the authors grant to all users "a free, irrevocable, worldwide, perpetual right of access" to their work. "Everything we publish is freely available online throughout the world," say the editors, "for you to read, download, copy, distribute, and use (with attribution) any way you wish. No permission required."

The Public Library of Science has added "publishing as gift-exchange" to the older idea of "research as gift-exchange." Nor, I might add, is gift-exchange at odds with commerce in this case; the editors allow commercial reuse of their journals' content. In the introduction to *The Gift,* I say that artworks exist in two economies, though one is primary; the same might be said of scientific knowledge in the Public Library model: commerce is not excluded, but it follows after contributions are made; it does not come first. To present my second example of a new noncommercial institution I need to back up and describe a little-known piece of the history of support for

the arts. In modern times, young artists in need of help have traditionally received support either from public coffers or from private fortunes. The question is, might there be a third path? Might not the art world itself hold wealth sufficient to support emerging talents?

An interesting experiment in that line was initiated shortly after the Second World War when musicians in the United States began to worry that the popularity of long-playing records would cut into their performance income. What if every time the band goes to the recording studio all they are doing is playing themselves out of half of next year's jobs? Responsive to such concerns, the musicians' union worked out an innovative agreement with the recording companies such that a small percentage of the sale of each recording would go into a trust fund, the fund then being used to augment the income of musicians playing live performances.

After half a century this institution, the Music Performance Fund, still exists. It distributes millions of dollars annually, and supports thousands of concerts in the United States and Canada. It's the largest sponsor of live, admission-free music in the world. In recent years it has also developed a Scholarship Fund to help pay for the training of young musicians.

What I like especially about the Music Performance Fund is its recycling feature, the wealth moving in a circle. That small percentage of the commerce that goes into the Music Performance Fund is a kind of self-tithing that the community has accepted so as to support its members, and to support musical culture in general (most of the performances are given for young people in schools). As a result, the recording industry is not purely extractive; the business side itself agrees to support the cultural ecology that nurtures musicians in the first place.

More to the point, I like the revealed fact that artists need not always go begging to taxpayers or private patrons; the arts themselves produce wealth and therefore, if we have the wit to organize the needed institutions, the arts ought to be able to support the arts.[2] In the United States, the Arts Endowing the Arts Act was, in fact, the name given to a legislative proposal that – had it been realized – would have nicely reproduced the structure of the Music Performance Fund.

In 1994, U.S. Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut proposed a cunning way to use the value of past intellectual property to support artists and scholars working in the present. Dodd's suggested legislation would

have added twenty years to the term of copyright protection, and used the income from those extra years to underwrite current creative work. At the time, American copyright protected an individual's work for his or her lifetime, plus fifty years; corporations with works "made for hire" (most films, for example) held rights for seventy-five years. Under the Dodd proposal, at the end of each of these terms, the rights to an additional twenty years would have been publicly auctioned, the proceeds going to build endowments for the arts and humanities.

Copyright has always had a double function. It encourages creativity and, because its term is limited, it brings creative work into the public domain. It treats such work as a private good for a term, and then as a public or common good in perpetuity. What the Dodd proposal would have done, in effect, is to add a middle term between the private and public, a transition period during which wealth generated by copyright would underwrite currently active creative talent. Or, to put it another way, for a limited period we would consider "the public" to be those men and women who are currently dedicating their lives to the arts and humanities, those who are most directly the aesthetic and intellectual heirs of the past, and who will most directly be the benefactors of any future cultural commons. The logic of Senator Dodd's proposal, then, replicates the logic of creative life itself, in which the past feeds the present and the present will before long contribute to artists not yet born. It is all the more distressing then that in 1998, in another striking example of post-cold war market triumphalism, the entertainment industry in the United States managed to outflank Dodd and his allies and persuade the United States Congress to substitute for Arts Endowing the Arts their own Copyright Term Extension Act, one that has added twenty years (retroactively!) to all copyright terms without any provision for the public domain side of the old balance between private wealth and common wealth. The Walt Disney Corporation lobbied heavily for this law; their early Mickey Mouse cartoons would have entered the public domain in 2003. Thanks to the Mickey Mouse Protection Act, as it is now known, they are safe until 2023.

This sorry bit of statutory theft notwithstanding, the art-wealth recycling feature of both the Music Trust Fund and the Dodd proposal has been on my mind for a long time, and I tend to mention it whenever I am asked to speak to the question of how we are to empower the gifted in a world dom-

inated by market exchange. On one such occasion, a 1996 talk I gave in Providence, Rhode Island, Archibald Gillies and Brendan Gill happened to be in the audience. They were at the time the president and chairman, respectively, of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and it turned out that the Warhol Foundation was just then looking around for new funding models. I soon joined them in a more sustained conversation about what initiatives might be undertaken, especially given the post-cold war loss of so much public funding for individuals in the visual arts. The result, after two years of brainstorming and fund-raising, was a new nonprofit granting agency, the Creative Capital Foundation, that since 1999 has been giving direct support to individual artists in film, video, literature, and the performing and visual arts.

Creative Capital differs from other arts organizations in several respects. For one thing, we make a multiyear commitment to the artists we support, extending and renewing grants where we can, and providing advisory services and professional assistance along with financial support. We ask that artists make a budget for their projects, one that includes fair value for their time; we help them find and negotiate with galleries; we suggest they insure their studios, and so forth. One Creative Capital grantee, whose studio was destroyed during the 9/11 attack on New York, had insured her space only months before.

Secondly, in line with the hope that the arts might support the arts, Creative Capital grantees agree to share a small percentage of any net profits generated by their projects with Creative Capital, which then applies those funds toward new grants. In designing this give-back portion of the program we had in mind not only the models I have just described but also the ethic by which the producer and director Joseph Papp used to manage the Public Theater in New York.

Papp's habit was to underwrite a great many theater productions and take a small ownership stake in each. Those that succeeded helped pay for those that came later. In the most famous example, *A Chorus Line* began at the Public Theater and then went to Broadway, opening in the summer of 1975. It ran without interruption for fifteen years, a commercial success that allowed Papp to support the work of less-established playwrights and companies. David Mamet, Sam Shepard, Elizabeth Swados, the Mabou Mines

theater group, and dozens more received support during the years that Papp managed the Public.

Potential profitability is not a criterion for funding awards at Creative Capital; as with other arts funders, we ask our panels to look for originality, risk-taking, mastery, and so forth; we respond especially to projects that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries. That said, the principle of sharing the wealth is essential to the Creative Capital model. It makes explicit the assumption that all who have succeeded as artists are indebted to those who came before, and it offers a concrete way for accomplished practitioners to give back to their communities, to assist others in attaining the success they themselves have achieved. Creative Capital is a small experiment with much that we would like to improve. In our first eight years we awarded more than $5 million to 242 artist projects, but we still lack an endowment that would make us self-sustaining (our seed money necessarily came from private philanthropy). We would dearly love to give larger grants, and more of them; we may well find that the give-back provision works well with some disciplines and not with others; and even if it works in a few cases, we may never find our *Chorus Line.*

For now, however, the point is less about the particulars of this case than about the search for practical responses to the general problem posed by *The Gift*. Some responses will necessarily be fitted to their historical period; the Music Performance Fund belongs to a time of powerful trade unions, and the heyday of public support for art and science seems to belong to the cold war.

But surely there could also be responses that transcend their time. The royal patronage that Sir Isaac Newton received may have fallen out of favor, but other innovations from his day have survived. The idea that colleges might have endowed professorships has not been lost. Newton was the Lucasian Professor of Mathematics; that position was created in 1663 by one Henry Lucas, and it endures to this day (the theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking is one of the latest occupants). The forums for scientific discourse that Newton knew have likewise endured. In 1672, Newton sent a long letter to Henry Oldenburg of the Royal Society in London, an outline of his theory of light and color. Oldenburg immediately printed the letter in the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society. It was Newton's first scientific publication. *Philosophical Transactions* is the oldest scientific journal in the

English-speaking world, having now published for over 340 years. Oldenburg was its founding editor. When he started it, it wasn't part of a scientific community, it created a scientific community, and that community has endured.

Lucas and Oldenburg: these are good ancestors for the community of science; their institutions survive and their names are remembered. And for the community of artists? Those who can be clear about supporting the arts not as means to some other end but as ends in themselves, those who can shape that support in response to the gift-economy that lies at the heart of the practice, those who have the wit and power and vision to build beyond their own day: for artists, those will be the good ancestors of the generations of practitioners that will follow when we are gone.

Cambridge, Massachusetts
April 2007

notes

1. An amusing echo of this debacle was heard many years later: in 1948 one of the tour's "surplus" paintings, Stuart Davis's *Still Life with Flowers*, was bought for a high school in Chicago by one of its art teachers. The price was $62.50. In 2006 the school sold the painting at auction for $3.1 million.
2. Actually, wit may not be the key ingredient; power helps. It was the American Federation of Musicians that got the Music Performance Fund started as part of their collective bargaining with the recording industry. The loss of union power is another chapter of the recent saga of market triumphalism.

Former Dutch kendo champion and activist Henk Oosterling (b. 1952) is an associate professor of philosophy at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. He has written widely on sacrifice, generosity and relationality. He is best known for his many cooperative endeavors with practitioners in the cinema, theater, design and the visual arts as well as social work, education and policymaking. Inspired by Japanese philosophy and the French philosophers of difference, he has elaborated an "ecosophy" centered on the transition from "radical mediocrity" to inter-est, i.e., from our total and unreflected-on embedment in media, technologies and insurance arrangements to an integral ecology in which physical health, social wealth and mental wisdom converge. Starting from the paradox of scarcity in affluence, this transition implies a shift from Maslow's famous pyramid to a network-based, transversal anthropology of "intervividuals," summarized in the slogan "Dasein is design." His latest books, "Woorden als daden" (Words as acts, 2009) and "Eco 3. Doendenken" (Eco 3. reflaction, 2013), describe the projects and philosophy of Skillcity Rotterdam, an ecosocial research model for urban revitalization and renovation focused on the singular sociocultural and socioeconomic situation of Rotterdam. In this model, non-pecuniary values such as self-confidence, responsibility, authenticity, ambition and craftsmanship are seen as inseparable from commercial exchange, even if the latter remains parasitic on their non-exhaustion.

interest and interesse
when is enough enough?

An Interview with Henk Oosterling by Sjoerd van Tuinen

SvT: Henk, one of your favorite phrases in your last book, "Eco 3. Doen Denken" (Eco 3: reflaction), translates as something like "Every combatant is a concordant" (Elke krijger is een gever). What does that mean?

HO: Literally, that a fight is always a relation, and that in its ultimate expression a fighter no longer needs to fight to relate in a more convincing and creative way. This has been taught in Japanese martial arts as the "sword of no sword." In the Tibetan Buddhism of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan monk and teacher who went to America after the Chinese invasion of Tibet, it's called Shambhala, or the way of the warrior. But then the ultimate gift in order to reach that "enlightened" level is to "kill" yourself: to break your survivalist ego in not caring whether you win or lose and just being there, in between life and death. This self-sacrifice has political modalities that have been performed throughout history, and during my lifetime, from Vietnamese Buddhists and the Czech student Jan Palach in the 1960s to a Tunisian fruit seller and Tibetan Buddhists recently. We find Western modalities of this self-sacrifice in Stoic philosophy. Michel Foucault discussed this in his last courses on the hermeneutics of the subject. According to Foucault, "killing yourself" or "risking your self" is part of classical *parrhesia*, or free speech. Socrates drinking the hemlock-poisoned wine is the ultimate icon of this free speech. So regardless of the modality in which one is prepared to kill oneself, no matter what the cause, this is the ultimate gift that cannot be exchanged and returned by some other value.

It is an unconditional gift?

That depends on what you call conditional. In self-sacrifice, there's no calculus of investment. Well, at least on a human scale. The gift of death is unconditional with regard to fellow human beings. But for the one who sacrifices himself, the killing is in a way conditional once another life in another world is involved, as when the martyr projects his ultimate act as a mediation between two worlds, a heavenly and an earthly one. Then, overcoming one's fear and giving one's life levels out an unbalanced relationship. When a Japanese fighter kills himself by *hara-kiri* or *seppuku*, the reason he kills himself is usually because he's stuck in a loyalty conflict as a result of which blame and shame are transferred to his ancestors and offspring. He kills himself in order to cleanse his blood of impurity. This is a deal that connects the human world with the world of its gods, as in a way every sacrifice is. When you kill yourself knowing you'll be taken into nirvana, or cleansed of your sins in an afterlife, or seventy virgins are waiting for you, there's a meta-deal, in spite of the fact that earthly values can't be met by divine or heavenly values. But in a mystic or Zen modality, by contrast, the fear of death is gone. One doesn't care; one doesn't even think about being killed. The absolute immanence of the here and now is the total acceptance of being wiped out.

So if I want to cleanse my lineage of whatever shame I've brought upon it, I have to think in terms of two worlds? But isn't killing myself still a deal I make with my offspring and ancestors, and thus constitutive of social relations within this world?

Instead of killing an individual, cultures or societies sacrifice scapegoats. The classical Greeks called these beings *pharmakoi*. Symbolic exchange was researched by Georges Bataille as the inner, constituent core of every culture. Transgressive rituals restore contact with a divine being or world and suspend the laws of this world. Jean Baudrillard criticized this idea of the constitution of the social by arguing that in capitalist consumer society, sign value recycles every sacrifice into an exchangeable value. In the terms of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the schizophrenic immanence of capitalism – decoding, recoding – no longer allows for symbolic exchange. How-

ever, Baudrillard himself reviewed his critique after the suicide attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11/2001.

> *So what's generosity in the final instance? Generosity still seems to presuppose a deal, if we're not talking about killing yourself. But is it possible to be generous without completely giving yourself up?*

For me, generosity covers a very broad scale, with different modalities, and with the sacrificial performance as its fatal limit. On a daily basis, generosity is less fatal, but it is nevertheless about giving a part of yourself without trading it for something else. There can be no return on investment and no exchange, quantitative or qualitative. Simply being interested without any self-interest is the bottom line of generosity. Giving presents is its most common expression.

> *But then isn't gift exchange by definition generous? The only act of unconditional generosity that we know in the West is the grace of God. He, or his replacement, the despot, the monarch, is the only one capable of sheer generosity, of pure radiation. He is the only point at which no deal can be made. This is ultimately the religious idea of what Bataille calls sovereignty.*

The right of the despot or the king is to pardon the one who has to be killed according to the law. That's a generous gesture, giving life. At the end of *The Will to Truth*, Michel Foucault talks about this right to pardon. Building on Carl Schmitt's famous definition of sovereignty as the right to decide on the state of exception, Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* deals with the aporia of transcending the law within the law. They both demonstrate that you need to suspend the law in order to preserve it.

> *So the right to pardon is an act of sheer generosity, whereas nothing that happens within the law can be an unconditional gift?*

Yes; then it's a deal. But I'd even claim that the right to pardon is a meta-deal: in the final instance, the despot's generosity legitimizes his sovereignty. Again, generosity as such is not an issue, because with real generosity it's

not possible to have an exchange of gifts. Foucault mentions the body double of the king, with reference to Kantorowitz, the real body and the eternal body of the king. As soon as you have two bodies, there's no possibility of a gift, because you can shift up and down between earthly life and eternal life, just as in Buddhism. All your actions will reflect back or be fed back onto your karma. You'll be rewarded afterwards for being so generous to human beings. Only the truly enlightened person, the bodhisattva who's ready to enter nirvana, decides to return to earth instead of leaving the karmic wheel and enjoying nirvanic harmony. He wants to go back to the people, to human beings, to share their suffering in order to enlighten them. Is this a generous gift? Probably so. The difference between the bodhisattva and the king, in other words, is that the king will be rewarded for his generosity and the Bodhisattva was already in the highest state imaginable when he "killed" his enlightened state. So in Buddhism, generosity has a different feel than in Western philosophy, because in Western philosophy law is always imperative, once you reflect on generosity. You transcend the law, you break the law, in order to eventually affirm the law.

So what does this tell us about the Western idea of fighting, that is, the martial way of giving?

When you fight, there's a cause: sheer individual survival, defending your clan, bearing witness of what you believe and are prepared to die for. The cause directs your actions. It enables you to transcend your situation in realizing that you have to achieve a goal …

For example, honor?

Is honor an individualistic value or the quality of a relationship? Honor is a quality that can only be achieved within a social setting. It's purely symbolic in the sense that you want to present yourself to the world according a certain performance and style that represent values you share with others. Once this code is threatened or challenged, one feels the urge to defend "one's own" honor by means of a duel or a fight. Honor is involved when you defend your alliance with others, your family, your clan, your tradition, your belief, that is, the community whose values transcend your personal

life. Honor is reflected in a secular sense in solidarity. When you fight for a cause, you have to ignore your own survival in trying to achieve the goal. So in being generous, one neglects the specific individual goals central to the Western way of valuing life. Any political way of experiencing an overall engagement or solidarity and acting upon it presupposes that you leave your specific individual needs and preferences behind. This is not a sacrifice, however, since you just do what you have to given this higher goal. But then again, how does this refer to generosity?

If all combat ultimately leads to concord, what kind of bond is there between the two fighters?

Take sportsmanship. There are unwritten rules that you respect in fighting for sport, just as there are in war. Of course, fighting is about winning, beating your opponent. In the Italian wars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the *condottieri* always tried to postpone fighting, because as long as they were not fighting they were earning money. Do soldiers in war ultimately care about the cause, or are they just fighting? Even in World War I, German and French soldiers who were focused purely on survival decided to play soccer together on Christmas Day. Once one goes beyond those rules, by contrast, there is terrorism. In terrorism, there are no rules, since the only rule is to kill as many people as you can, including yourself. The idea of symbolic exchange is that you establish a bond by destroying something. There are new possibilities for interaction after a sacrifice, while terrorism means sheer destruction. Thus, when nations imposed general conscription in the nineteenth century, everybody had to sign up for one or two years to fight for the nation. But conscripts only fight because they've reached a certain age. The Athenians, under Pericles, were not forced, but as citizens of the polis they still had to be prepared to defend the polis anytime. In the final instance, a fighter doesn't fight for survival. A fighter fights because he's a fighter. In a very specific yet social way, he enjoys a fight, because his fighting skills are trained and perfected.

Before we talk about skills, I have one more question about the difference between the East and the West. What do you think are the

most important differences with respect to gift exchange and sacrifice between the East and the West?

Let's shift to everyday life. When you give someone a present in Japan, you have to be very careful. When you give something very valuable, the receiver is obliged to overvalue the gift you've given. You have to act in proportion when you give something to someone. Generosity shows itself more or less in exercising restraint in giving, in not offending or shaming someone. The Japanese never open a present on the spot, as we would in Holland to show our appreciation. In Japan you avoid this "publicity," since it can impose an obligation on the receiver. Like everything in Japan, gift-giving is very formalized to avoid shame. *Giri*, or obligation, is a debt of gratitude as part of a self-sacrificing pursuit of the happiness of the ones who are your superiors.

And how does this show up in martial arts?

In martial arts, the offense of *giri* can trigger the aforementioned *hara-kiri* or *seppuku*. Or, with the Japanese yakuza mafia, cutting off half your little finger. You have to be loyal to your superior, and to defend the honor of the superior you have to be prepared to sacrifice yourself. But if that superior – a lord or *daimyo*, for instance – opposes the emperor, a retainer or samurai can get entangled in a double bind, having to be loyal to both. But the point I want to make is that any reflection on the fighter in terms of the gift and generosity is perhaps inadequate. The bottom line is that a fighter isn't thinking about generosity. A fighter is thinking about *giri* and honor. If you aren't prepared to die, you can't fight. In the final instance, I don't know whether you can apply the notion of generosity to explain what happens in a fight, because I think generosity is parasitic on economic deals. It's still part of an economic discourse, while sacrifice acts in between an economic and a religious discourse, or, as Bataille stated, a restricted and a general economy: an economy that thrives on scarcity and one that spoils abundance. To me, generosity is part of the former, sacrifice part of the latter.

We've spoken about sacrifice on the one hand and generosity on the other and discussed some interesting intercultural differences. We're

focusing so much on these questions because we're investigating non-pecuniary values, and basically, all non-pecuniary values seem to be symbolic values for which there is no common measure, no quid pro quo.

What is a non-pecuniary value? A non-pecuniary value is a value that can't be exchanged for money. It presupposes a nonequivalent quality that can't be replaced by quantitative means, such as money. It escapes the symmetry of quid pro quo. You can't just shift from the pecuniary to the symbolic realm or vice versa. There's a qualitative difference, not a quantitative one. Look at the present state of what I call self-assured life, where every assurance is reduced to insurance. The claims procedure in a risk society in fact annihilates honor and all non-pecuniary values, because you can request monetary restitution to take revenge or feel acknowledged, in spite of the fact that your honor has been taken away or you've been shamed or excluded.

Exactly. We're narcissistic, but we don't have pride in the sense of something that has to do with honor, because it has no symbolic value. Or to put it differently, honor becomes narcissistic as soon as you can't share it.

Sharing is also a non-pecuniary practice. In sharing things in a pecuniary sense, a quantity is divided, as is the case with an amount of money: everyone gets their share. That's the core meaning of dividend. An in-dividual is someone who doesn't share, who's in one piece. But since we've been digitized, we know that sharing is adding up, not dividing. Sharing as a non-pecuniary practice adds up: it doubles the quality. Thus, sharing as honor is a relational practice. Although the claim culture seems to have lost this distinction between pecuniary and non-pecuniary practices, no one is really satisfied with cashing in after a claim is acknowledged. Some negative non-pecuniary value lingers. This lingering might be called *ressentiment*. The obscene calculations of financial compensation always come with a remainder that cannot be expressed in money. That remainder gnaws at your soul. It plants deep roots in your affective system.

How is this non-pecuniary remnant expressed? How does "ressentiment" surface nowadays?

That's quite hard to say, for two reasons: first of all, because nearly everything is economized nowadays. What does it mean to capitalize everything? In urban policies, policymakers and consultants speak in terms of social, human, intellectual and cultural capital, quantifying non-pecuniary values like social life and cultural life. Beauty, the good, the bad, humane feelings, empathy, being smart or stupid – all these qualitative values are now expressed in pecuniary terms so that they can be calculated in a spreadsheet; funding is desperately sought; a social return on investment is demanded. Managers capitalize and invest in all these relations in order to govern processes rather than people. Richard Florida and Pierre Bourdieu write about cultural capital, while Robert Putnam has shown how social capital is disintegrating, introducing terms like binding and bridging. We're redefining qualitative relations in quantitative terms, and as a result there is less and less non-pecuniary value, at least in a market-driven neoliberal Big Society. The second reason is the locus of this remainder. One could say that non-pecuniary values, like ressentiment, have become subconscious. But "subconscious" suggests an interiority: God – the external remainder – has died and been internalized as individual conscience with a ressentimental remainder. Yet I don't think this remainder has either interiority – the subconscious – nor/or exteriority – God. It's an affective territory in between individuals in constant de- and reterritorialization.

Non-pecuniary values are quickly and easily disqualified as the archaisms of, for example, those so-called primitive immigrants who still believe in a code of honor. Of course, despite the fact that you're compensated, you may still feel you have to avenge your daughter who's been raped or killed. But if we're no longer willing to take such feelings seriously, is there anything left worth fighting for?

You can legally fight for compensation, even if that compensation is expressed in pecuniary values, exchange value. You fight before the court; you sue someone else; you formalize and legalize the fight and obey the law. In our society, you can't fight in any other way than by law. As a consequence, jurisdiction feeds on the non-pecuniary remainder but can never grasp it.

This is because the non-quantifiable remainder is a loophole that comes into existence only as a result of the juridical net woven in order to catch the cash. In the courtrooms of civil law, truth is therefore not an issue. This is the basic meta-truth of a self-insured network society: we're all connected, we're like nodes in a network, in which individuals are meshes, relational knots. And as such, every individual is first and foremost an *intervidual*. When it comes to non-pecuniary values, however, the question is whether these knots are purely relational, even the seemingly non-relational ones. After all, honor starts with the other – the ones you identify with and the ones to whom you want to show your way of living, with its values. This makes this practice a symbolic one. Two things are connected and acquire significance. It's the other who appreciates your stature and your performance, and if the other doesn't appreciate your performance, or even frustrates it, then it can't be an issue of restoring honor.

> *I wonder how this relational perspective works in your current educational practice in the city of Rotterdam. The idea that every combatant is a concordant appears to have been very influential for you. You've introduced the regular practice of judo in the school curriculum, for example. Of course, despite your critical reservations about pecuniary values, your whole Rotterdam Skillcity project depends upon subsidies and needs legitimation in terms of capitalization. Yet it simultaneously seems to revolve around non-pecuniary values – self-confidence, ambition – and how to teach them, how to implement them and how to effectuate them.*

Indeed, respect, being interested, or pride, for instance – all these are non-pecuniary values on a scale stretching from self-confidence to ambition. Yet the way I implement this scale and try to persuade policymakers is by using terms like "social capital," "cultural capital" and "return on investment." So in a way, I use the arguments of pecuniary values to fight for non-pecuniary values. That's a risky business. I am a scientist and an activist.

> *Precisely. So how does this work when the whole non-pecuniary domain has been colonized? Do you always work with a subtext, a hidden agenda?*

The best-kept secret is the one you communicate to everyone. Remember Jacques Derrida's analysis of Edgar Allen Poe's "The Purloined Letter." There's no hidden agenda, no esoteric truth. There's a two-edged sword that cuts the cake. The central value of the Skillcity project is craftsmanship. This is an existential quality, as Richard Sennett has recently demonstrated, not an exchange value. Craftsmanship is a quality that you add to the work you're hired to do and that can be rewarded in money. Similarly, ambition is a non-pecuniary value that's added to your focus in working but can't be rewarded directly in money, although excessive bonuses simulate an equivalent. The point is that craftsmanship and ambition can both be used as *unique selling points* to invest in a career, and they can be stimulated by investing in people to upgrade your enterprise. So in my opinion there are no non-pecuniary values that – on another level, as with the sacrifice of Japanese martial artists and the generosity of the king – do not also have an exchange value. Every non-pecuniary value performs on a level at which it can acquire an exchange value. Professional pride, as a mode of honor, capitalizes social interactions and economic transactions, and in doing so it can become an exchange value. But that doesn't mean you exhaust these non-pecuniary values in this capitalization; you use part of the efficacy of a value in order to invest that value in an exchange situation. But as for the positive remainder – honor in professional pride – something stays behind and can be reinvested in terms of ambition. Craftsmanship is rewarding, but one is paid only for one's efforts. On the value scale, ambition, like self-confidence, is an extra you can't pay for; one hopes it comes with the job. So on the one hand, you always need to have non-pecuniary or symbolic values to be able to capitalize relations. Yet on the other hand, the whole capitalization process in turn generates a kind of unintended symbolic spillover. There's always a surplus that can be reinvested but that can't be exhausted by better payment. Someone can stay ambitious; someone wants to be perfect; or someone – in a negative sense – stays vengeful despite being compensated under civil law. This is what interests me: that non-pecuniary values are part of the process of exchange, and that the process of exchange lives on or is parasitic on this non-exhaustion of a non-pecuniary remainder.

In other words, in Skillcity, your educational project in Rotterdam, non-pecuniary values are the ultimate; they are its finality.

What we do is encourage craftsmanship so that pupils and students can get jobs that fit their capabilities, have careers and live proper lives. But the ultimate value is to be interested; that is, to be engaged in a non-pecuniary way. This is the double meaning of "inter-est": being in between while making money. These kids are linked in a self-reflexive way, learning skills as a material feedback which on the run enables them to value their life in qualitative terms, like self-confidence, pride, interest and solidarity. That kind of value, and not craftsmanship as an exchange value, is the core business of what we're doing. Craftsmanship, in its broader definition, is a quality of life in the sense that it encourages you to be creative and expressive beyond given forms and formats. Professional performance means going beyond form, thus creating new content. In Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, form of content and form of expression are related yet different. Form of content means you're connecting on a material level – as assemblages of bodies – while form of expression means this dynamic, open practice of relating within given institutions creates its own discourse – assemblages of enunciations. Skillcity strives for Dasein as design, transforming individual autonomy into the kind of *intervidual* practice that Foucault labeled as an aesthetics of existence.

Can you give an example?

Well, take the autonomy of the work of art as it's conceived of in work aesthetics. The work of art as an artistic expression triggers experiences that can't be exhaustively reduced to the work as a form of content. In its form of content – the haptic experience of the work – it triggers affect in its observers that, at the level of the form of expression, inspire them to redefine their own views or even change their way of life. This generous gesture isn't intrinsic to the medium – say, paint on canvas. The sensation of the painting, for instance in Mannerism or Romanticism, goes beyond the autonomy of the medium as form of content. Its performance is the interaction between the painting and its public, a performance that transforms over the years. Modernist work aesthetics is about the autonomy of this expression. Due to late-modernist tendencies in performance art, the emphasis has shifted to explicit interaction with the public, resulting in the 1970s in a reception

aesthetics, claiming the primacy of the form of expression that sustains Bourriaud's relational aesthetics.

And what about the practices you teach, such as gardening and cooking? What does this look like in a low-income Rotterdam neighborhood? How do you teach kids to express themselves?

I appreciate this relational – that is, intervidual – aspect of practice, and I've made it central to the educational focus of Skillcity. Gardening is imperative for understanding how to take care of your food, which is imperative to understanding your bodily performance. Cooking is skilled reflection on the food you eat. The ecosocial circle, as we call it, is based on working together. It's a cooperative enterprise that's performed at our primary schools. Three hundred and forty pupils do judo, eat a hot three-course lunch four times a week, cook, grow plants and vegetables, get biology and philosophy lessons, and all this is assisted and sustained by middle and higher vocational education traineeships and intensive parent participation. This daily collective performance is reflected on through cooking lessons, philosophy and environmental lessons. There's an aesthetic dimension to the performance as well. As artists, these kids are skilled in handling a medium – their body, a chef's knife, gardening tools, language – in order to gain a space of freedom to choose and act in a nonconventional way. The skills they acquire in judo, cooking, gardening and philosophy are material reflections that enable them to connect in different ways in their daily lives to the forces and affects that operate upon them. Through judo techniques, they train and reflect on their physical relationship to others; through gardening skills, they learn how to take care of and relate to other beings; through cooking techniques, they understand how to handle knives and fire in a different way. Philosophical dialogue and debate are the mental pendant of judo. It teaches them to cope with conflict and tension. In a way, this is media literacy far beyond the skills of handling a computer or an iPad. This is where the substance of artistic expression – thinking through sensations, creative interaction with your medium – comes to the fore.

Is that what you teach them explicitly?

You don't tell the kids or their parents these kind of abstractions. We skill them and, in skilling them, get them to reflect on what they do. It's thinking in doing; that is, "reflaction," the foundation of discourse practice. They sign up for workshops and clinics on technique, health care, IT and cultural skills. Teachers encourage them to strengthen certain aspects and make their performance reflective. Their acquired skills are registered in their portfolio, a crafts booklet, and there are group presentations. Everything the kids do is written down and evaluated. But we always focus on skills, not on competences or products. Our aim is to enhance their media literacy in the broadest sense in order to make them aware of how they're situated in the present world: in between media, as nodes in networks. Skillcity's political anthropology starts with relations – intervividuals – media – rather than individuals and interiority.

> *But nevertheless, kids as individuals are involved. Policymakers are proclaiming that talent should be spotted and developed, and there's institutional embedding. How do you deal with that?*

It would be a deal in the sense that you're working for your financers, progressing towards your targets according to proper criteria that have been formulated. That goes for the schooling of kids as well. Of course we embed our programs in institutional formats, but that's not the way we value and "grade." We value the way that this or that pupil in this specific workshop is expressing himself: not his interiority but the way he, with other pupils, handles tools as media. It might be a hammer, a bandage, a computer, a voice, a gesture, a guitar, et cetera. For example, you give him a piece of wood and tell him to cut it like this and then make a toolbox out of it, using a saw like this and a hammer like that, because that's how you make a toolbox. But what we appreciate is that the kids are conscientiously and cooperatively making this thing. The skill is not exactly how to make a toolbox but how this kid makes this toolbox the way he makes it. And once he or she is interested, we scale up the skilling.

Moreover, skilling presupposes a master-bachelor structure, as Foucault proposed in his hermeneutics of the subject. In ancient Greece, this pedagogical practice was generous by definition. Remember the etymology of "generous": it comes from *genus* – race, stock – that is, of noble birth, aris-

tocratic, and in that sense, figuratively "magnanimous" and "unselfish." The master-bachelor structure is a relational practice, focused on the care of the self. Caring is expressed in my projects through cooking and gardening. And the fight with oneself – another definition of learning – is physically projected in judo and mentally in philosophy – dialogue – and in so-called irenic, or peace, lessons, in which kids learn to mediate conflicts at school. So this is how, for us, the combatant becomes a concordant.

> *So these kids handle the means or media to express what they're doing outside the simple exchange relationships within which they produce, and it's this reflexive distance that allows non-pecuniary values to prosper?*

The ultimate non-pecuniary value is that the kid enjoys making this with someone else: he's interested. As you know, inter-est was Hannah Arendt's political value *par excellence*. And Sennett, being a critical pupil of Arendt, has translated this political value to the scale of work. Following Isabelle Stengers, I define inter-est on a "mesopolitical" level. To transpose it to the jargon of policymakers, we invest in these children by strengthening and enhancing their cultural or social capital, and this will eventually make them more adequately responsive to and skilled at what they need for performing in public space. Our programs enhance their active citizenship. Not by drilling – Foucault's disciplinary dispositive – but by skilling – a Deleuzo-Guattarian diagrammatics. We open up their world by scaling up their networks and enabling them to connect in more open ways – indeed, to be generous on a daily basis. The former law-abiding, decent citizen transforms into a creative "entrepreneur," a crafty intervidual. This reflective skilling is my mesopolitical proposal to counter what I have labeled our "radical mediocrity": the uncritical way in which we are ruled – *kratein* – by our media and the illusion that our media and the screens we reflect upon are our roots – *radix* – in the world. Inter-est is an ecosocially critical practice and, as such, a generous way of being in the world, *in medias res*. Once these kids become more skilled, that is, materially reflective in dealing with their peers and parents, they'll be more complete, their lives more integral – more ecologically, too. Ecoliteracy is needed in this new age. Skilling is also about civic and public performance: you don't throw things away, you don't spoil

things, you're reflective about how you spend your money or buy your food or raise your kids, and so on. And since ecology isn't about nature but about technology, media literacy and ecoliteracy overlap.

Let's return to gift-giving. Skilling means you're trained by someone who invests in you by transferring certain skills. Is there a gift exchange between the master and the bachelor?

Yes, of course. The master's generosity lies in his handing over of his knowledge and skills to the next generation. This is the basic activity of cultural transference. But this transference always involves power; that is, asymmetrical relations. In guiding, the master takes care of the bachelor. It follows that this relation is irreducible to a simple monetary exchange. Of course, I have to pay for my tuition, but it will never be equivalent to what I get in return, because we're talking about two qualitatively different orders. The ideal situation for the teacher is that the pupil loves his knowledge and that the master enjoys teaching and gets the respect he or she deserves. Partly, teaching is a narcissistic process, in the sense that the teacher is the pivot of attention. It's also a power-related situation, in the sense that the master has power over his students, who can be intimidated, manipulated, et cetera. Yet one has to look beyond these all-too-human aspects. The relational generosity becomes explicit in the love for skills and knowledge, that is, the "philo"-sophical attitude that's essential to an ecosophical practice. Here we find a gift situation. I think the non-pecuniary value in a teaching situation is the joy of teaching and being taught.

You're speaking from the perspective of the teacher. What about the pupil, for whom the values enjoyed must be different? Power makes the teacher-pupil relationship conditional, yet mustn't there also be some kind of reciprocity?

What we can call socioemotional capitalization – one of the monitored targets of Skillcity – is based on mutual respect and enjoyment. The pupil enjoys being taught and wants to know. He is curious and interested. Triggering curiosity and interest is the aim and source of satisfaction of the teacher. The moment he triggers his pupil's curiosity and the transfer of his

knowledge and skills becomes possible, an affective, unintentional symmetry is realized, leveling the power relation as long as it remains a transparent and fair deal. In other words, the joy must be reciprocal: that is, relational. The master can enjoy his teaching insofar as the pupil responds to it with interest. Otherwise, enjoyment is narcissistic, and the pupil becomes a mirror. Once the pupil enjoys being taught and the teacher enjoys transferring his skills and knowledge, non-pecuniary values are transferred as well. The teacher becomes a role model based on critical identification, not on idolatry.

So joy might be a value in the exchange relation between a teacher and a pupil, but what's the nature of this exchange relation? The teacher transfers knowledge and certain skills and gets respect in return. So there's one kind of transfer, but there must be more: there must also be the continuation of the trade.

That's it. The pupil's identification with the teacher is reversed in the teacher's anticipation of the pupil's ability to perform the acquired skills in an economic sense. The craftier the pupil, the more gratification for the teacher.

So it's a complex enjoyment. It can be a nuisance as well.

Yes, it's a very complex process, full of frustration for both the pupil and the teacher. At a certain stage, even envy and fear of being overruled can spoil the teacher's joy. Rephrasing it in sacrificial terms, moving to the other end of the spectrum of generosity: the teacher must be prepared to kill himself, at least mentally, because a creative student may enrich the trade and the tradition. That's also the basis of a cultural transference, one that Freud called the killing of the father. A good father kills himself in advance to spare his offspring the shame of killing him. In simpler terms: when do you stop teaching and become friends?

You've mentioned the concept of interest – "Interesse" in German – a couple of times. As any reader of your work knows, this is a crucial concept for you. Before, you were speaking of interest as a value, but in Heidegger, it's more like an ontological condition.

I mentioned Hannah Arendt. She takes the German word *Interesse* from Heidegger and translates it, on a political level, to the word "interest" in English. Suddenly, a non-pecuniary value – inter-est, which is an attitude, an open way of relating to the world, a being-in-between your inside and outside – is inserted into a pecuniary line of thought: economy. In between those two languages, two regimes, two order-words, some "thing" happens, and Arendt is operating philosophically within this complex folded space of politics and economy. In *The Craftsman* and *Together*, her former student Sennett criticizes her categorical positioning of "work" in between labor and inter-est. He seeks to reformulate values such as craftsmanship and cooperation. Cooperation is a skill, not a natural inclination. You have to learn to work together. So in a sense, Sennett too rephrases, within the folded space of inter-est and interest, values which are both pecuniary and non-pecuniary: craftsmanship and togetherness. Work is one aspect of cooperation, but the other aspect is being open to others in order to be able to cooperate. Sennett positions a relational value – cooperation – which, like other non-pecuniary and pecuniary values, moves in between two levels: labor and interest/inter-est. Cooperation is both an aspect of inter-est and a labor value, because you need to work with other people, and you must be prepared to accept the expertise, power and authority of other people in order to cooperate. But ontologically, even before starting to work or before being engaged and involved politically, inter-est indicates simply embedded relatedness. It's the most open way of being related as a result of sheer being-there, -now and -here. Inter-est or being-interested means you're prepared to open up and accept the unpredictable, yet without anticipating fear or feeling threatened. It's a non-pecuniary value.

So inter-est is an ontological value?

Interesse in German or Dutch is, first of all, an open attitude towards the world: you don't claim a well-defined future; you don't anticipate; you're prepared to open up and just have it the way it is. You're in for the gift as a *pharmakon*: the ambivalent gift that can be both blissful and poisonous. It depends on circumstances and relational skills whether it becomes the former or the latter. But "interest" in English is profit or return on investment; it has to do with calculation, anticipation and speculation. Due to its am-

bivalence, the concept of interest is crucial to the evaluation of generosity: it has both a pecuniary and a non-pecuniary value. But it's also because the generosity of being interested is triggered by, and in relation to, what is happening, the event. Being generous is a possibility and involves acceptance of what's happening, like that of the warrior who's beyond life and death. So with inter-est you're opening up to the event: something might happen that you can't anticipate; something might happen that changes you, that changes your views in challenging your opinions. Inter-est is generosity towards the possible. And on top of that, inter-est can be understood as an ontological dynamic of forces, since force is a tensional vector that is per se in between.

> *Your concept of interest, or indeed any value, as ambivalent, both pecuniary and non-pecuniary, seems to be based on the differential tension in Bataille's distinction between restricted and general economy. While at the individual level, sacrifice is unconditional, on a collective – institutional, societal or communal – level, sacrifice may be very useful, because the king, the church or whatever authority will use the sacrifice to appease the population and restore the law. Generosity in a religious or political sense is the surplus of the relation between the king and his subjects, a surplus that allows the king to transgress the social contract in suspending the law to kill or pardon a criminal. So beyond the ultimate experience an individual can have of his sacrificial gesture, this fatal generosity is still useful at the community level.*

Right. In the way it effectuates its performance, in other words, in its formal expressivity, for a community generosity becomes a useful tool for reaching other goals, beyond the asymmetrical generosity of the individual. It generates social capital. Social capital means it works for the group, as cultural capital situates you in the group. You can spend all your money on a painting and hang it on the wall above your sofa. You will have lost a lot of cash in nearly sacrificial spending but gained cultural capital, raising your status as a cultivated person who distinguishes himself as member of a cultural class and gaining authority in arty, high-culture discussions. A painting is your possession, but at the same time, it's a leased relation, because individuals

neither have nor are totally identifiable through social or cultural capital; rather, they participate in the circulation of cultural and social capital that connects them. You can't sell yourself or buy your neighbor; you can only socially and culturally capitalize your relation with him or her.

This is actually a serious problem for artists today, because they have a problem defining what their value is. The strategy of neoliberal government is to tell them they have to perform in the market to prove and emancipate themselves in terms of pecuniary values.

Artists nowadays are stuck in between two discourses: the avant-garde and a new one, which has not yet been articulated in spite of the fact that we already have new "intuitions" about creativity. The surplus value of being schooled as an artist is no longer evident. Artists can't claim beforehand what their value is, because their public performance has been fragmented and disseminated beyond the conventional institutions. New technologies have changed artists' role. Craftsmanship, the handling of artistic and technological media, has become more prominent. Creativity has been democratized in our design culture. Dasein has become design, and lifestyling demands an aesthetics of existence.

So what should they do if they can't claim exclusiveness? What kind of discourse do artists need when they're no longer the privileged incarnation of creativity, a very old modernist avant-gardist idea that still has some currency among artists nowadays? They can't just play along with the dominant neoliberal discourse, because then they can't distinguish themselves from anybody else, because social and cultural capital is everywhere.

The exclusiveness of artists, for me, is their education in handling a medium in a critical and interested way. I don't care about the old Renaissance concept of virtuosity, not even modernist sublimity. In a practical sense, the craftsmanship of the artist is an asset the citizen can use to become critical towards his own media. Art went public long ago – in spite of the fact that we still have private collections, which for that matter have become speculative investments – but nowadays, publicity, or public performance, has

changed too. In my research on intermediality I distinguish between (1) art in public space; (2) art of public space; (3) art as public space; and (4) public space as art. I have argued that inter-est refers to art as public space, which is comparable to Bourriaud's relational aesthetics. Thus, the artist, with his capacities, is an exemplary intervidual who knows how to handle his medium in an interested way. The artist is media-literate. He shows that, and how, a medium can influence its user in a critical way without getting completely lost in the process of radical mediocrity. A citizen's relationship to "his or her" media should be media-literate: that is, intermedial, making him realize that he is (as) a node in networks. Artists experiment with their media in order to create new worlds. They are capable of saying: This is it; it's finished. Citizens, "using" "their" media, should be capable of saying the same: This is it; enough is enough. Media literacy is a precondition nowadays to be part of a collective or a total work of art, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* as the asymptotic limit of an aesthetics of existence. This, to me, is involved in the Foucaultian idea of an aesthetics of existence as a collective effort to integrate media into a collective way of living without having the media taking over and forcing upon you an infinity of needs and preferences.

It seems we hit rock bottom when we talk about the problem of needs. Of course, we can never say "This is it." Aren't we by definition incapable of saying "Enough is enough"?

This is *the* ecosophical question! There is only one way of saying "This is it," and that's where we started: in the generous gesture of taking your own life, which as the last autonomous gesture is at the same time the most paradoxical one. We can also think of Camus, who claimed suicide was the ultimate limit of an absurd life. The only way to make your life into a work of art is by committing suicide. That is the moment your biography starts.

Now that we've closed the circle, let's go a little bit further on a diagnostic level. Today, no one is capable of saying "This is it," because we're constantly being dragged along by media, such as the latest technology, or indeed, the most important mass medium of all, money. It's through these media that lack is generated "artificially", such that nothing is ever sufficient.

This is what I call radical mediocrity: not being able to go beyond the media; being ruled by media; being in the middle while thinking that you can be outside the system, making autonomous choices. Once the medium is the message – or massage – generosity is no longer an option. However, abundance is the rule, even if we experience this through constant lacking. Let's relate generosity to what could be considered as basic needs in order to simplify the argument. These are my needs; everything else I possess but do not need, I can give away. Yet is this generosity? Or is it sharing pecuniary values in order to enhance the non-pecuniary, including our choice of a way of life? Is generosity a choice: giving away what you possess? Or in terms of general economy, a choice for a specific state of mind and of being that can only be realized with others? If so, inter-est and generosity are nearly synonyms, and the economic dimension overlaps with the ecological dimension.

This isn't inter-est but network logic.

Inter-est is the ontological dynamic of network logic. Both are mobilized by connectivity. There are certain values that articulate inter-est. Being interested as an intervidual is not the basic value; it's the formative attitude in which values can be actualized. In being interested, you open up to other people. I'm interested in you, you're an interesting guy, so we're going to talk and do something together, and then suddenly you do something that offends my basic values: you appear to be a racist, for instance. Then my interest meets its limit, and I have to decide whether I want to open up again and give you the possibility to reconnect or to be formal and indifferent. So inter-est is a kind of space/time that you're prepared to step into, but within this interval – the Japanese call it *ma*: the in-between – basic values regulate this relating. In that sense, Inter-est isn't a value but an attitudinal exposure in which values can be actualized.

What's absolutely crucial is the integrity of our life with others. I'm thinking of another concept that's important in your last book: that of a cynicism that has lost all integrity by disconnecting our self-knowledge from the way we want to live. Cynicism in a Sloter-

dijkian sense, that is, as "false enlightened consciousness," enables you to trick your own values.

I'd like to define cynicism in a Baudrillardian way as being smarter than smart: you've already seen it all and know it doesn't work, which allows you to feel good while being indifferent and disconnected. Cynicism is "ressentimental" in the sense that you're deploring or undermining your basic values. It's reactive nihilism. Cynicism pretends to be open but is closed in upon itself; it pretends to be relational, but it's completely monomaniacal. It pretends to be smart, but it's smarter than smart. Every affirmative proposal is countered by an impossibility: "That won't work." In cynicism there are no ultimate values and criteria for living your life. The only criterion is being smart. Cynicism is a short-circuited rationality.

I'm interested in this, because for me, cynicism is the most treacherous relation to your values. You have values, but in the end your highest value is your smartness, and this devalues all values and leads to nihilism. In the sense of a reactive modality of nihilism, would you agree cynicism is the opposite of inter-est? And could we say that, as such, it's a transcendental illusion of inter-est, meaning that inter-est will always produce cynicism, as if it needed cynicism to materialize?

Yes, cynicism can be conceived as contrary to inter-est, as being closed in upon oneself is opposed to openness to others. But I don't like oppositions for other than heuristic reasons. In a logical sense, they may be contrary, oppositional or even contradictory, but I think there's neither a logical nor a dialectical relation between cynicism and inter-est but rather a differential relation. There can be no question of a sublation of cynicism in opposition to inter-est into a new state of mind or being, of transgression being interested. At least, not for the moment.

So if I'm a contemporary, recently graduated artist, I am, of course, horribly offended by the austerity measures that have come down on my professional field, but I'm also completely cynical. My training in the art academy was a four-year education in cynicism, in

becoming artier than art. I was trained to keep up certain values of art, such as originality and autonomy, that are no longer prevalent, values that I can't relate to in any affirmative way. Cynicism is my immune strategy, so to speak, since it is my way of prevailing. What would you recommend that I do, raised and educated in cynicism?

I agree with your analysis, but it's incomplete, because on the other hand, art students nowadays are more informed about the world than twenty or thirty years ago, and they're more design-minded. Art, architecture and design fit into the same formats nowadays. Design was always a pejorative term, an applied art, like architecture. But now craftsmanship is becoming more important, because so-called autonomous artists have to deal with technological media in order to produce works of art. As a result, the traditional autonomous arts are becoming more aware of their traditional craftsmanship, how to handle paint or marble, and this is also the case in performance art, theatre and music. So there's more awareness of the medium – more than ever, I think. Perhaps not explicitly, but at least *in actu*.

How does this craftsmanship save us from cynicism?

Craftsmanship reorients our mediated existence in media society. But this requires training in a material sense. It also revaluates our bodily existence. And the role of the senses. In the 1970s, avant-garde and conceptual art dematerialized art practices. Having a good idea counted as having a concept, and experimenting more often than not meant messing around better than others. Today, a reskilling of the traditional arts is taking place. Yet this does not take us back to modernism in the traditional sense, because we're beyond transcendence, sublimity and genius.

One of the other contributors to this book is Lars Spuybroek, who proposes a theory of beauty. He says that we have been misled by the sublime for a whole century and that we have to focus on beauty once again. Beauty is a very traditional value; indeed, it's the value of art in the Kantian sense. Is beauty a viable value today?

Lars has been educated as an architect. He went beyond the boundaries of proportional spaces, created new topologies and is now perhaps reorienting himself to his craft. Beauty always has to do with harmony, and for that reason, it has to do with craftsmanship and with the way things are proportioned on a higher scale. Beauty lifts you up and gives you an experience of coherence, consistency or continuity that goes beyond craftsmanship. Perhaps we're in need of that because the world has become so fragmented. And craftsmanship is never about the sublime. So by implication, it is related to beauty, if it has aesthetic meaning and if we are forced to choose. If beauty is now more valuable than the sublime, that's because we're in need of new scales, new proportions, new ways of connecting.

> *This is interesting, because it seems there's a kind of conservative subtext to discourses on beauty. You've said that what matters to you is the moment where interconnectedness gains coherence and consistency. According to Deleuze and Guattari, art is all about composition. Beauty is about proportionate composition. We cannot relate directly to the infinite; we need the finite. If the challenge of any symbolic gift exchange is to reestablish proportionality, is beauty the finality of symbolic gift exchange?*

Interesting thought. On a geopolitical level, we're redefining proportions. We need to find the scale on which we can connect in a new way – to nature, to each other, to ourselves – and really take responsibility for our technopsychological mode of being. If the sublime is about excess and beauty is about harmonious proportion, then perhaps the rescaling of our disproportionate comfort zone is served by a new orientation to beauty. The recent urge for the beautiful meets our craving for proportion in an excessive world, as well as our need for global justice and intergenerational responsibility, which is how the Norwegian prime minister Brundtland defined the focus of ecological awareness in the 1980s. So let's get back to sacrifice and generosity. As there is sublimity in sacrifice, there might be beauty in generosity. Still, the answer is too easy. Although sacrifice is excessive, it erases all proportions on earth but simultaneously restores proportion in heaven. Generosity is never aimed at calculated proportionality, nor can it be excessive.

Generosity is beyond excess and proportion, beyond the infinite and the finite.

Generosity can be approached from different angles. From the point of view of the one who receives, generosity is a disproportional investment that transcends any possible counteroffer. From the point of view of the one who gives, generosity is a beautiful gesture immanent to an aesthetics of existence, an investment in global justice or a correction to counterbalance karmic negativity. Yet in neither way does it involve morality. One thing is certain: although it might have a sublime quality in the risks it takes, there can be no beauty in monetary exchange that thrives on speculation, while there can certainly be beauty in symbolic exchange, as long as the giver distances himself from the investment, that is, from the desire to be rewarded for his generosity. Beauty in generosity would imply becoming someone else, as it were, an integral becoming him- or herself by exchanging him- or herself. So on an aesthetic level, generosity can be perceived as a beautiful gesture, beyond self-sacrifice but also beyond petty calculation. As with beauty, the generous one steps back and distances himself from the act in becoming the event. Thus, generosity and beauty are aristocratic qualities. With the sublime, by contrast, you can never step back and distance yourself; you are always part of a power play, momentarily swept away by the fortitude and magnitude of something you nevertheless want to grasp. Generosity here is beyond comprehension once it comprises total connectivity.

Lars Spuybroek (b. 1959) is a professor of architecture at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta and the author of several books on design and aesthetics. After building the HtwoOexpo water pavilion and large electronic public artworks such as the D-tower and Son-O-House in the Netherlands and the Maison Folie in Lille, France, Spuybroek turned his focus to writing and teaching. He is best known for his stance against the sublime, which he views as having fatally connected with technology during the age of modernism; dating the era between 1914 and 2001. The essay in this book is part of Spuybroek's current research into the nature of beauty, which began with "The Sympathy of Things" (2011), a book that makes surprising connections between the theories of John Ruskin and digital design. The text interrelates grace and beauty as mirror images of one another, opening up the possibility of an exchange of event and object. The core of the argument relies on the notion of radiance, a classic term in theories of beauty, which gradually acquires the meaning of "thickened appearance," shifting the actual appearance of things to their weight and value.

charis and radiance
the ontological dimensions of beauty

Lars Spuybroek

Whenever we look at things, we tend to look at them with a cross-eyed view, with two images superimposed so that we see a single thing, as if suspended between two states of being: one of its parts gathering, the other the object itself being part of a larger set of relations in an environment, context or world. This is true for any person, motorcycle, tree, mountain, painting, country, or anything else. Though much has been said about this topic, the mystery remains: things are made up of parts and are themselves engaged in relations. This is the standard model, and though some introvert theories tend to stress the first state and some extrovert ones the second, both states need to be explained as related to each other. Things do not simply lead a double existence, alternating between two states, melancholic one moment and jovial the next. Contenting ourselves with such a nestedness of existence won't suffice, because sets of existence turn being into a form of coexistence. There have been completely vertical notions of it, such as the Great Chain of Being, and completely horizontal ones, such as DeLanda's flat ontology.[1] Neither explains how, through the various magnitudes, existence itself occurs. When the parts are happily collaborating to form a whole, how can they simultaneously be engaged in what the whole experiences when engaging other wholes? Such questions need to be answered without resort to paradox, ambiguity or any other form of doubling. Things have to be thought of as singular. My claim is that only beauty – that is, not *logos* or *physis* in any form, be it mathematics, philosophy, materiality or nature itself – allows things to jump from one scale to the other. It enables the parts on the first scale to communicate with those on the second scale, but only via the contraction of the single thing, since it is things

that are beautiful, not parts. With beauty, a certain inversion or twist takes place, a certain jump or turn between multiple levels, from the parts to the whole as well as from time to space, and from the vertical to the horizontal as well as from the convergent to the divergent. Strangely enough, with beauty we are able to accept the fact that nature makes jumps – in contrast to Darwin's axiom "Natura non facit saltus"[2] ("Nature does not make jumps") – without adding those jumps together to form an infinite ladder leading to heaven.

Let us consider, for a moment, a typical experience of beauty. Suppose you're wandering through the forest when suddenly something comes over you – an experience that doesn't happen every time (and might not happen again). On this occasion, though, you exclaim out loud, "Oh, that smell!" or maybe, pointing at the foliage, "Look at that green!" or, pointing upward, "Look at the sun trying to work its way through the canopy!" These are all examples of familiar exclamations in response to beauty, which often occur in combination, even in sequence, cumulating into the typical cascading effect of beauty. Such an experience can take any form, as long as it involves the confirmation of one or more properties (greenness, smell, light) accompanied by an exclamation point.[3] Again, we could easily repeat the same type of experience in an encounter with a sunset, a mountain, a girl, a painting or a car. Or a motorcycle or a country. Or a boy or a man – at this point the varieties are of no importance. What matters is identifying the ontological turn of beauty, the actual jump or twist, namely that in the experience of beauty, the parts that make up the thing are shed or even thrown at you in an absolutely singular form. Parts that merge into a whole spill out of that whole. Parts that converge into a whole diverge from that whole. This inversion I propose to call, albeit somewhat weightily, the saltational principle of beauty. What at first seems a double movement – parts gathering, parts spilling – is turned into a single movement by beauty. Take a sip of the best possible scotch and notice how the hints of pear, oak, spice and coconut won't stop rolling over your tongue, filling the space of your nose and eventually your whole head, if not your whole body. How odd is that? Is the scotch alienated from itself and broken up into pear, oak and spice? No, the pear is an inalienable part of the scotch – which in the land of philosophy would be an illegitimate statement to make, as it would be in mathematics, set theory or any other logical discipline. Except that of aesthetics. Beauty

takes place at the very heart of ontology; it explains how things are inwardly composed while outwardly oriented. Beauty and existence need to be understood as inherent to one another. In this respect, yes, it is the parts that are beautiful, but not *qua* parts, only *after* they have been gathered into a whole, as radiating from it. When I enjoy the specific greenness of the leaves, the "of" matters as much as the greenness itself; that is, though we find pleasure in the color, we accept it only as given by the leaves, not as a green in itself. It's both a property and shared, which, in short, makes it a gift – a manifestation of that ancient concept based on distributed ownership. The greenness is given away without the leaves *de facto* departing from it, while we could as easily say that it is a property impossible for the leaves to own, since it's a greenness shed, not kept.

If these statements are valid, beauty might be understood as intrinsically related to the gift, and subsequently the experiencing, sharing and making of beautiful things as varieties of participation in gift exchange. In fact, the best evidence for such a hypothesis may lie in the origination of what the ancient Greeks called *charis* (pronounced with a hard "h"), which evolved from gift exchange into an extensive notion of aesthetics that involved actions as well as objects. Though mostly translated as "grace," *charis* was considered a form of radiance, which was later to be remodeled by Plato into *ekphanestaton*, by Aquinas into *claritas*, and by Schiller into *Schein* – all variations of radiance and each one playing an instrumental role in the history of beauty. At this point, however, there is no need to trace the particular mutations; we should first try to uncover the conceptual linkages between radiance, *charis*, gift and existence. Although they share many overlappings, the four can be clearly distinguished. Radiance denotes the general form of beauty, *charis* its social form and the gift its economic form, while existence employs only specifications of the general form. Though it relies on radiance, existence doesn't necessarily rely on the actual beauty of things, since it also makes use of the ugly, the cute, the comical, the splendid and much more. How exactly such specification proceeds is yet another story we'll have to save for later; for now, we should merely explore beauty from the perspective of its general form: all things radiate in one way or another. Only positivity exists, not negativity, nor neutrality – even in cases when things are horrendous, melancholic or boring. Radiance is usually viewed as a form of glory or magnificence, which is fitting where the crowns of kings or halos

of saints are concerned, though not in general; this is why beauty is so often confused with the sheer verticalism of the sublime. We should take great pains in unraveling this tangle, and as we do so, we should be able to see why beauty so closely resembles grace, for grace, according to Schiller, is a movable beauty, and in the end, it is the mobility and variability of the parts that allows them to be shed.

charis and beauty

That the notion of the gift turns up in a discussion of beauty probably comes as no surprise – we have seen it happen on various occasions.[4] However, it is astonishing that when following the historical development of the gift from its tribal roots to its Greek application in the form of *charis* in particular, one can literally observe the realm of gift exchange transforming into that of beauty. What is more, while investigating *charis*, its close ally grace, and the accompanying conceptual model of the Three Graces, we encounter the very same jumps from time to space and from the vertical to the horizontal. In this context, the first thing to know about the gift as it was and still is in use in tribal gift cultures is that it is completely different in nature from a free gift. As the British anthropologist Mary Douglas says, there simply is no such thing as a free gift.[5] The gift as it occurs in such cultures is fundamentally an exchange, and part of a highly ritualized cycle of giving, receiving and returning. According to Marcel Mauss, in his seminal essay *The Gift*, these three stages are essential to the gift cycle.[6] He famously gets to the core of the problem early in the book by posing an intriguing question: "What power resides in the object given which makes the recipient return it?"[7] And a few pages later, he offers an answer by introducing us to the *hau*, the spirit of the gift in the Maori system of thought, which always "wishes to return to its birthplace."[8] This concept has both inspired and troubled many scholars. In short, it means that the gift is inalienable;[9] it can only part from its origin for a certain period of time. Giver and gift, in this regard, cannot be conceived of as fully separable; the act of giving comprises the creation of an elastic sphere, so to speak, a sphere of extension and contraction, more than an actual parting with an object.

This constitutes the whole reason why gift exchange – and to my mind the experience of beauty – cannot be schematized by two agents, such as an object and a subject or a sender and a receiver, which constitute the usual model of information exchange. In fact, we should represent it in terms of three partners (see fig. 1). At the origin, we position a person who gives away the hau-object to a second person, who then returns it to the first. Next to the arrow between the first person and the hau-object, we write the word "giving," since it diagrams the very act of the gift, and next to the arrow going from the hau-object to the second person, we write "receiving," and from the arrow of that person back to the first, "returning." When we transfer this model into figures personifying these acts, we immediately recognize them as the Three Charites, as they were known in ancient Greece, or, in their Roman guise, the Three Graces, the first goddess (Aglaia) embodying giving, the second (Euphrosyne) receiving and the third (Thalia) representing the return.[10] Later on in this essay we will have more room to elaborate on their names and their specific relationships to beauty, but it is already quite clear that the structure of giving parallels the structure of beauty: the given parts must return to the whole, and three steps make one circle. Let us also keep in mind that the number three in this case does not constitute the static geometry of a triangle, as we encounter it in the Christian Trinity, for instance, but the dynamic geometry of circulation, as is the case with other female Greek triads, such as the Horai (seasons) and the Moirai (fate). While Mauss extensively discusses the "three obligations" (to give, to receive, to reciprocate) in relation to the potlatch, he surprisingly declines to link

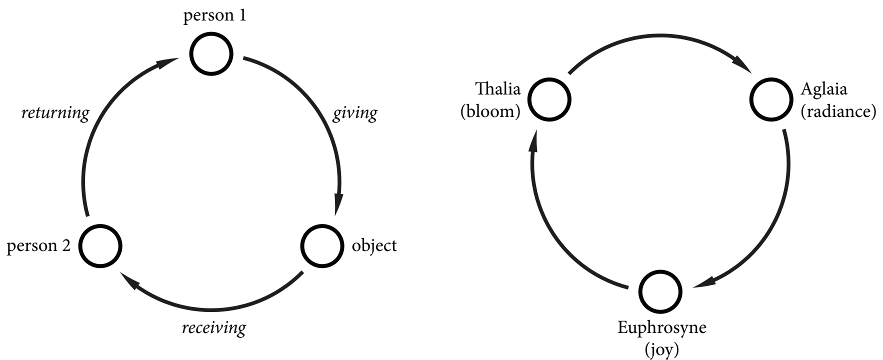

Fig. 1. The three-step procedure of gift-giving (left) and its representation in the Three Graces (right).

them to the Charites, and he therefore overlooks the possible connection between what he calls the "force of things" and beauty or grace. In fact, he explicitly states that he doesn't want "to take into account the aesthetic phenomena"[11] that are related to the gift, and of course, for his sociology it might not be of primary concern. It is all the more so to us, precisely because the force of things – beauty – can only be circulated and not owned and therefore has an unmistakable bonding effect on all involved.

Every now and then we find references to the gift in aesthetic theories, but conversely, there are hardly any references to beauty in anthropological or sociological studies of the gift. I could only trace one exception, in Maurice Godelier's *The Enigma of the Gift*:

> The beauty of a shell, its singularity are not purely accidents of nature: in order for it to become an exchangeable object, a shell must be worked – polished, pierced, mounted, decorated; a copper must be poured, molded, fashioned. Exchange-objects are therefore unequally beautiful and unequally singular, and their value varies accordingly.[12]

Apparently, in anthropology it mostly goes without saying that gifts are beautiful, but surely it can't be an accident that clothes offered as presents are extensively patterned and colored, and that metal objects, such as necklaces, bracelets and rings, are painstakingly polished. Moreover, they are given during special festivities, ceremonies and feasts that are themselves meticulously constructed spheres of beauty created by music, song and dance. A purely sociological theory, a purely anthropological or economic theory of the gift, will by definition fail to grasp the scope of what occurs in gift exchange – we need a discipline that takes Mauss's force of things to heart. More precisely, aesthetics is able to deal with one of the major problems of such theories, namely the nagging discrepancy between symmetrical and asymmetrical gifts. Obviously, when one takes into account Mauss's theory of reciprocity, acts of pure generosity (giving without expecting return) or pure thievery (taking without being given) cannot be explicated, which is why Marshall Sahlins defines them respectively as "generalized and negative reciprocity," as opposed to the balanced form.[13] When discussing the first category, generalized reciprocity, Sahlins lists examples, such as *noblesse oblige*, help, generosity and hospitality, taking a mother's suckling

of her baby as the primordial example of the "pure gift." Now, in the first place, we should never underestimate a baby's cuteness, which is an extreme form – an extremely distorted form – of beauty, a beauty compensating the lack of power of its subject, the infant, which is in constant need of help, nourishment and care. Secondly, the infant's well-being and flourishing should clearly be considered a response to the gift of the milk,[14] similarly to how the ancient Greeks regarded the flowering of plants as a response to the gifts of the sun and rain. After all, flourishing is one of the Three Graces. All Sahlins' exceptions must involve an aesthetic of some kind – not just the cute – and can therefore be included in cycles of reciprocation, since a pure gift can't exist. Therefore, instead of denying the existence of the force of things by seeking exceptions to reciprocation, we should expand it from material to aesthetic exchanges. What the cute-milk-growth connection shows is that exchanges must be viewed in this broader aesthetic sphere, where (a) responses need not be immediate – on the contrary, the longer they take, the stronger the bond; (b) it is not always clear where the original gift and counter-gift should be located – a gift can generate strings or clusters of cycles; and (c) exchanges don't necessarily consist of the transfer of matter; feeling – the etymological root of the word *aesthetic* – is always involved, and the feelings by definition concern the distribution of ownership, as we will see later when discussing the relationship between joy and gratitude.

This broadening of the notion of the gift, the suspense of the return, the ambiguity of gift and counter-gift, and the involvement of feelings as well as actions and objects in cycles of exchange can be examined in all possible detail in ancient Greek culture. The fact that the Greeks slowly moved from a tribal clan-based system highly dependent on gift exchange to a myriad of city-states and military cultures based on alliances and friendship but also sacrifice and heroism means they saw everything, every object, every act, in the light of a general aesthetic, or, as they called it, *charis*. Though we see it in words like *charisma* and *charity*, the term *charis* is usually translated as "grace," derived from the Latin *gratia*, a term that today carries as much theological meaning as it does an aesthetic signification of gracefulness. Thus, *charis* is deeply embedded in the idea of the gift and its reciprocation but also in feelings of gratitude and gratification. Looking at ancient Greek culture to gain a better understanding of the kinship between the gift and

beauty can prove extremely illuminating, because as a transition from one into the other it follows the saltational model almost literally. Between gift and beauty, we see the act of giving an object transform into an object that presents itself as a gift; that is, an object that is not simply present but present with a certain forwardness, acting toward you, the recipient. This, in brief, is the definition of a beautiful object, with all its implications of movement and directionality.

Why was ancient Greek culture so obsessed with beauty? We see it not only in the meticulously painted vases and carved temples, the refined statues and clothing, but likewise in the political speeches delivered with the help of Peitho, the goddess of persuasion, and in the combing of a soldier's hair and the anointment of his body before battle.[15] Beauty in ancient Greece was to be found in every pore of society, at the heart of every exchange. One of the main reasons for beauty's emergence must have been the shifting of *charis* from the realm of agricultural tribes to the *polis*. Enabling the circulation of grace between variably sized groups at variable moments in time, and thus allowing it to become a circulation of values, enabled the foundation of the city and the state, far larger organizational entities than tribes and their villages. What functioned as *charis* in actual – temporal – exchanges during ceremonies and rituals started to function as beauty under primarily spatial conditions. The German classics scholar Christian Meier compellingly argues in his 1985 book *Politik und Anmut* that the *polis* is based on a highly designed and regulated state of kindness, of politeness (a term exposing its etymological roots) and the maintenance of friendships (*philia*), facilitating a wide variety of exchanges in which violence is the exception and beauty the norm. Besides beautiful objects, we encounter stylized manners, the pervasiveness of music and dance, eloquence in every possible situation, the formalized drinking of wine during the *symposium*, even the art of making honey[16] – the list is endless.

At first, it appears that the link between beauty and gift exchange reveals the social (or ethical) nature of the aesthetic,[17] but more disturbingly, the reverse turns out to be true: the social is fundamentally aesthetic. Beauty, in this regard, is the spatialization of *charis*, and subsequently the democratization of it.[18] Beauty allowed *charis* to disseminate itself, to be distributed at any time and place, instead of only during feasts and ceremonies, those special events organized in temples and courts. In the context of the gift

cycle being a form of distributed ownership, beauty amounted to an increase not only in scale but in strategy as well. Beauty could be given before the receiver was yet present and received after the giver was no longer in sight. Though the reciprocation of the gift in tribal cultures was already meant to be delayed or even suspended, it always involved a material connection between a giver, a gift and a recipient, whereas beauty stretches itself out over time into space, allowing for the distributed ownership of the gift to be multiplied. For when it is spatialized, the gift becomes available to all who encounter it and therefore becomes a public act, turning the establishment of space first and foremost into that of public space. Public space is the arena of appearances. When the gift is the sharing of inalienable properties, beauty is circulating among the public and considered beneficial to that public, a public good. The gift would be returned not only through pleasure but through people's being good citizens, lovers or good friends. Marcel Hénaff speaks in this context of a "unilateral gift,"[19] similar to Sahlins' pure gift, suggesting beauty can do without reciprocation. However, in the final analysis there can be no question of unilateralism; beauty marks the transformation from the single exchange of the gift not into its absence but into a multiple exchange. It freed *charis* from the chains of actuality and opened it up to space and its organization, which may contain many actualities, because each experience of beauty is in itself an individual experience. The temporal quality of *charis* transformed into the spatial quality of beauty, a quality that from very early on – earlier than the eighth century BC – was described as a glow, radiance or shining.

In *The Age of Grace*,[20] Bonnie MacLachlan collects almost a dozen different meanings of the word *charis* from ancient Greek poetry, be it Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Hesiod's *Work and Days* or Pindar's *Olympian Odes*, to mention just a few of her sources. Next to taking on the meaning of the gift itself, *charis* can involve the pleasure the gift invokes, but also the act of a favor, a sexual one or one of kindness; an offering to the gods; a feeling of gratitude or, more generally, the communal bond that *charis* establishes; and, last but not least, beauty: the beauty of a hairdo, earrings, a garment or a way of speaking or singing. The breadth of the spectrum is mind-boggling. A lack of *charis*, for instance, is how Achilles describes Agamemnon's lack of recompense for the prowess he exhibits on the battlefield, which makes Achilles so angry that no booty can make him change his mind, until his

friend and lover is killed and he returns to fighting using the shining shield made by Hephaistos (the lame god-smith and the husband of one of the Three Graces). In the *Odyssey*, the term *charis* is also used to describe the beauty of Odysseus when he anoints himself by bathing in oil, with "the locks flowing in curls like the hyacinth flower."[21] And *charis* likewise denotes the radiance of Hera when she puts on her "earrings, consisting of three berry-like drops / and much *charis* gleamed therefrom."[22] The shining shield, the glistening body, the gleaming beauty – without exception, they are forms of radiance. In most cases, radiance doesn't involve actual light or reflections; it primarily involves the aforementioned shedding of properties by a thing or being, which can be actions such as favors as well as objects such as earrings. Radiance occurs when activity and object are inextricably bound up. Radiance is not simply directed outward but actively oriented. Parts are not passively stored in the object, quieted down by harmony and order, and wrested from their origins through some operation called beauty. No, in beautiful things there exists a certain looseness of parts, resulting in a thing's openness and even vulnerability. I have already mentioned motion and variation as formal aspects of beauty, and though this is not the moment to investigate their relationship, it is precisely that mergence of activity and beauty which we define as grace, as we see in the fact that the term "graceful" is still used to praise gestures, postures and movements but not objects. "Grace," said Schiller, "is a movable beauty."[23] And conversely, as Leonardo said a few centuries earlier, "Beauty is arrested grace."[24] The thought of the one clarifies the other by reversal. Of beauty, while it is physically at a standstill, we could say that it appears not as an image but as an act, and of grace we could say that it appears not as an act but as an image, though physically in motion. Such a switching of roles prevents actions from being simply submerged in the flows of time and opens up things (images, objects) to reciprocation and response. To be sure, beauty and grace are not identical, and Schiller rightfully distinguished them, though it would be a mistake to think of grace as distinct from beauty in the way that ugliness is, or magnificence, or cuteness: conceptually, grace and beauty are equals, but since grace historically appeared first on the scene in the form of *charis*, it remains at the core of beauty. Grace is the beauty of actual movement, but beauty is the movement of the gift. At a certain point in history, it was no longer necessary for the object to be literally handed over by the gift; in the ancient

Greek view, its beauty sufficed. Hence, the role between the act and the object was slowly reversed: in the tribal world the act contained the object, while in the Greek world of beauty the object comprised the act of giving (see fig. 2). Therefore, we shouldn't conclude simply that grace consists of movement and beauty of stoppage, since in either case both motion and arrest play a role; in grace, movement is objectified, and in beauty, the object is mobilized.

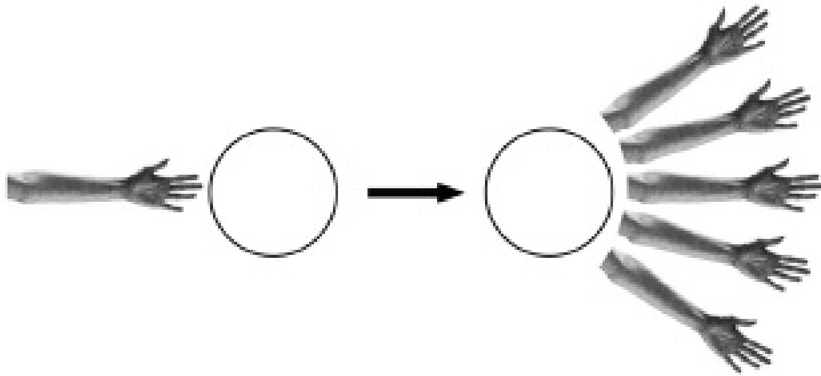

Fig. 2. Beauty as gift: a diagram of the gift's transformation into beauty via "charis," depicting generosity on the left and radiance on the right.

If *charis* defined the way a bride's dowry was passed on or the way a general thanked his soldiers by offering them booty, at a certain point in Greek history it was no different from the glistening coming from gold or the movement coming from jewelry and hair, or the way the sun sent down its rays or the clouds nourished the fields with rain. The primordial act of giving is that of nourishment. For the ancient Greeks, life was absorbed in ever-revolving cycles of giving that were just as much circles of beauty-sharing. A beautiful thing was a gift, a thing that came forth or, as was often written, shone forth. It did not simply appear (*phainesthai*, a term still present in contemporary words like phenomenon, phantasm and epiphany) but was something that appeared with a forward motion (in Plato's word, *ekphainesthai*), making beauty both an object and a movement.

The gift and its reciprocation are the reason why the Three Graces have become such a powerful model for understanding beauty. Let us, for example, take a look at Antonio Canova's beautiful neoclassical sculpture of the Three Graces and see how the hands, arms, elbows, knees interlock, how the bending, weakening or even exclusion of a part of one is compensated for by one of the others. In fact, we don't see three young women standing and simply holding hands; we see them as a unit. Leaning, dancing and standing are all intermixed, and if one of the sisters were to step out, the others would surely lose their balance and fall. We discern a group more complex than three merely interconnected entities, a collective with all its parts woven together, revolving around a vertical axis: three sister-goddesses named Aglaia, Euphrosyne and Thalia. We'll return to the latter two further on, but let us start by establishing that the name of the first literally denotes radiance. Aglaia, as she is called in Hesiod's *Theogony*,[25] is mentioned in Homer's *Iliad* as Charis,[26] and in both cases portrayed as the wife of Hephaistos. As radiance, she represents beauty perfectly; she is its giving, shedding quality, and light pours from her.

Looking more carefully at Canova's sculpture, we notice something curious: Aglaia stands a bit higher than the other two – not much, just a few centimeters, yet it seems rather fitting when one thinks about how things or people of beauty, which is what Aglaia embodies, "stand out," exceeding not only themselves but often others as well. I don't have to remind anyone that Achilles is a hero, and "hero" was a technical term in ancient Greece, i.e., part of the metaphysical system, and the same goes for the heroism of Odysseus. In fact, their heroic deeds are the basis of epic poetry, which is the poetry of praise, and praise is a vertical act: it turns a man or woman into a demigod, moves him or her upward but also removes the person from actuality to reserve them for immortality. Greek society, which was fully engaged in the construction of a horizontal plane of exchanges through inventing the notions of *dêmos* (the people), *dikê* (justice), *eirênê* (peace) and, in a way, equality, could only construct such a flat society through idols of verticality, that is, gods, victors and heroes, and what Hannah Arendt called "greatness."[27] And this has been the source of some serious misunderstandings. Of course, sociologically, these are two distinct directions; aesthetically, however, the double move is turned into the single act of beauty: in order to jump forward, that is, to make a horizontal connection for reciprocation,

things (humans, objects, anything) initially jump upward. To jump as far as you can implies you first need to gain enough height – respectively a feat of excess and one of measure. Every leap follows its own specific, curved path. It is a single curved trajectory constructed between two linear axes: one vertical, the other horizontal; one of excellence, the other of connectivity; one of sacrifice and heroics, the other of equality and bonding.

Why not a movement that is purely vertical? one might ask. Well, that would be the move of the sublime and the sacred, and the sublime can only be answered by awe, by complete congelation and passivity, while the sacred is that which retreats from circulation,[28] raising itself above society, not landing between humans but blocking circulation by setting taboos and remaining high up in the air with all the other untouchable entities. In mentioning "serious misunderstandings" a moment ago, I was referring to the confusion of the sublime and the beautiful. The sublime and the sacred constantly demand that we answer them with subordination and submission: more precisely, they treat recipients as subjects, in absolute contrast to how beauty works. So why not simply horizontal, then? Well, ontologically speaking, there is no ground to walk on; the connections between things cannot be preconditioned by a horizontal ground or a "plane of immanence";[29] there is no "sub-" to the "-stance." A ground would by consequence create a vertical system, since things would necessarily have to take place on that supporting surface, thereby prohibiting the development of equality. No, beautiful things pull themselves up by their bootstraps. That doesn't mean heroes exist or gods exist, or even God himself exists (nor that they don't exist, either); it means that to connect you need to jump the gap in front of you, and to do that you need some form of faith (this is the proverbial leap of faith),[30] or sacrifice, or bravery, though I don't think that Achilles is more brave than, say, a blooming lily in the field, since both demonstrate the same vulnerability during encounters.

While beauty is deeply linked to excess, to confuse it with ecstasy, with the Dionysian *Rausch*, or with even terror[31] is to deny it the necessary measure, the *metron*, that allows the gift to be passed on to a recipient. Without measure, the excessive nature of beauty will immediately slip into the realm of the sublime, into the realm of Bataille's excess,[32] inevitably retiring into the sacred. For ages aestheticians were afraid of excess; this fear was gradually assimilated by Romanticism – we, on the other hand, fundamentally

shy away from measure, drilled by a century of undergoing the excesses of the sublime, or, as it is better known, the age of modernism. Our weariness has proven wholly inappropriate: we have mistaken measure for proportion, harmony and *consonantia*, which are merely seasonable variations of an act that every age has to reinvent, and even challenge, though never blindly abolish. Beauty is a measured form of excess, and it is vital to distinguish it clearly and definitely from, on the one hand, mere harmony and, on the other, the sublime, even from splendor or magnificence. The costs of immersing ourselves in an aesthetic of the purely vertical are enormous, since this denies beauty the creation of local – not global (there is no "world" as far as beauty is concerned) – horizons, i.e., spheres of action and cycles of exchange, or even collective moods, atmospheres and lifestyles.

radiance and existence

What at first in this essay seemed to be the development of an aesthetic theory presenting the umpteenth view on beauty has now slowly turned into a concept of existence – existence in the broadest possible sense, namely the existence of all things, objects as well as living beings. In the realm of grace and beauty, things present themselves to us – and to other things – as gifts. To assess this concept of the thing-gift, we should position it between two extremes, between the thing as an empirical bundle of properties on the one hand and as ontologically held together by dark essences on the other. Although the gift borrows aspects from both philosophies, it resists identification with either one separately. Empiricism is so obsessed with properties that it can never be sure how they are bundled, and essentialism is so certain of the whole that the multitude of parts seems a mere illusion. As we saw above, the theory of beauty as a gift claims that an appearance is accompanied by a certain vector, though not necessarily of actual motion. Beauty replaces the actual handing over of the gift with radiance, which gives it more of the character of excess or emanation. Radiance combines the two stronger halves of essentialism and empiricism: a continuous stream of properties that includes a certainty that they flow from a single source. Without their weaker halves, i.e., the skepticism of the one and the need

for a dark entity of the other, radiance in effect amounts to the following: things by nature exceed themselves – a phrase so paradoxical it would surely drive any philosopher mad. Things are somehow larger than the space they physically and mentally occupy, penetrating their environment while at the same time not connecting to it.

Exceeding is generally equated with transcendence, that is, the transcending of the physical, tangible object by something else, a higher being or a higher idea. Though I am in full agreement with the first part – "transcending the physical" – I am not with the second – "by something else." The transcendence of beauty has long been considered as a matter of things going beyond themselves – a formulation which can't be improved, but which is invariably followed by that disappointing extrapolation stating that things go beyond themselves to arrive at a state of the Pure, the True, the Perfect, the Just, the Ideal – in short, at the Beyond with a capital B. It's completely unnecessary to assume things transcend themselves because a higher reality is hoisting them upward. Even so, that is no reason to shut our eyes to the vertical component of beauty and proclaim the universal flatness of immanence. That "micro" transcendence of the first step, perhaps better termed a local transcendence, is a form of excess that in fact enables a notion of the real; it's what real things do, not what the ideal does to make other things exist. Local transcendence is part of the saltational act: real things jump upward to land horizontally between other things, not to detach themselves from them. Beauty goes from real things outward, not from idealities inward. It is not one thing shining through another; no, beauty is the way things exist, and they do so forwardly and givingly. Things create a zone around themselves in which they can act and interact with others; without that zone, they would be merely a collection of parts and never reach the state of a whole. Therefore, the type of transcendence argued here is radically different from the usual one, since instead of a thing being exceeded by something else, we should ask: How can a thing exceed *itself*?

One answer is that although things are finite, they are never finalities. To all things there clings a degree of indeterminacy. Sure enough, this view is widely accepted with respect to objects of fine art or glamorous fashion models, enveloped as they are by a cloud of *je ne sais quoi*,[33] but it applies even to the most finished, determinate objects. For instance, when I throw a heavy bolt through the kitchen window because I've forgotten my house

keys, that bolt transcends the finality of being screwed into a nut. Or, a bit less dramatically, when I put my dinner plate on top of a stack of books, in a hurry to see a football match and lacking a table, the books transcend their definition as reading material. And we can quickly extend such encounters to, for instance, skiing down a mountain slope or dancing to music; committing murder with a hammer; staring into a lake or fire; making a bird's nest or bungee-jumping off a bridge[34] – all engagements with the indeterminacy of things. There is nothing in a sound that tells us to move our feet, head or hips. And snowy slopes are not made to ski down, nor are lakes made to provoke staring. Nor are twigs made to be assembled into a nest, nor bridges made to jump from; and hammers are made to drive nails into walls. Still, things have encounters like these every day, encounters that aren't accidental, merely intervening with their operationality, but are of a more fundamental and more direct, aesthetic order than that of any possible usage or skilled action. An essentialist like Heidegger would never have been able to appreciate that. To him, things were either (invisibly) handy or (visibly) broken,[35] and even though his shift from the phenomenal to the operational expanded the power of things, it meant things would be able to do only what they were supposed to – a jug pouring wine – or less – a jug getting cracked – but never more. Yet there is always more, as Adorno writes in his memorable statement on nature's beauty:[36] a "more" leading us toward things, a quality of being what we call enchanting or charming. That is the forwardness of things; they glow in our hands, in our minds and eyes: the thought of an action such as throwing the bolt through the window enters our mind as an irresistible spell. In other words, radiance can make us see things that are not immediately visible in the realm of the phenomenal but still belong to the presence of the object. We do not grasp things with our consciousness; it's more the reverse: things touch, strike and captivate us – and if we take another look at the diagram of the outstretched hands of radiance (fig. 2, on the right), that is not so surprising. The indeterminacy of a thing by far outshines any predetermined state, as if it is surrounded by thousands of whirling loose threads – loose threads which exist for our sake, so we can tie into it, not simply for their own sake.

And it's all there; things do not withhold anything or keep anything in reserve. They are utterly generous. Their existence consists more of a surplus than a reserve. Reserve is essence, virtuality, order, meaning, all those attrib-

utes that are obscured by externalities and that lie hidden *behind* a thing; surplus and excess, in contrast, lie *before* it, either literally shed around it or, more metaphorically, residing in its future meetings with us and other things. That is the genius of things, and beauty begins there. It starts with episodes as banal as a dinner plate on a stack of books – one hardly notices the miracle that is taking place there – and continues all the way to the most exquisite demonstrations of beauty, be they objects set with shining jewels, faces surrounded by the most lavish of fair tresses, the sparkling faces of film stars, or paintings in all possible colors and swirling forms. It's the whole reason why film stars and fashion models have faces that are, on the one hand, utterly unique, and, on the other, wholly average. How is it possible that when you superimpose all the faces of all the women of a certain age of a certain period and region, you get Kate Moss or Greta Garbo? If they are so average, why aren't they plain? It is because, in contrast to the hexagonal metal bolt, they have physically and formally merged with their indeterminacy. The bolt is only beautiful in its heroic flight toward the kitchen window; Moss and Garbo don't have to resort to such extremes.

Surplus doesn't mean all is necessarily immediately visible to us or to the many others the object may have relations with; it means *nothing is in principle invisible*, and therefore that the phenomenal has to be seen as continuous with the ontological. To be sure, the phenomenal doesn't cover all of what a thing is, but it definitely is not on the other side of it either. A thing is all that which radiates, though it glows beyond what we see at a certain moment. What radiates is not an invisible idea exceeding the object's appearance but a visible indeterminacy exceeding the determinately visible – an *extra*, a *bonus*, that exceeds the finite contour of things. Certainly, when we form a cycle of beauty with a number of an object's qualities, we aren't consuming all its qualities. This is merely because we are not taking everything in, not because the object keeps anything hidden. And other people, other things, form other circles taking in other aspects; ergo, there must be a fundamental too-much to things, and such excess is the aesthetic quality in itself, an absolute abundance or redundance. There is no reason for things to hold anything back, to be timid or secretive. If they kept a part for themselves, we would never be able to explain how the repressed part related to whatever they were willing to share with others. No, it's all there. Beauty keeps a grip on you as more and more properties are released, replacing the

temporal, streaming sequence of experiences with the experience of spatial depth. The true extensiveness or weight of a thing lies in its radiance, in the thickening of its appearance, in the depth constructed by the contrasts and similarities between properties. Beauty expands from the phenomenal into the real by becoming a phenomenality of the extra. This radical generosity makes the world fuller than full. Reality is a plenum of things, each thing existing in a state of generous surplus, while actuality – what happens – is a smaller, received and returned, segment of that, with the aim of feeding change and novelty back into reality. In contrast to virtuality, which explains events from an even smaller germ that potentializes and unfolds, the theory of radiance is one of a superactualism, that is, of a *presence beyond the present*, of a beauty that always exceeds its interactions. Reality is filled with more than actuality can deal with, or, in our earlier terms, the given exceeds what can be reciprocated – amounting to a superactuality which by far exceeds what the present can process. Evidently, the prefix "super-" implies the saltational principle. The world is full, then, yes, but not solid, or, if you like, not consistent. The indeterminate zone surrounding things prevents solidity. They slide and roll over one another in a sea of contingency, never to be fixed in position, circulating in ongoing cycles of exchange.

In the history of art, this zone of indeterminacy and radiance was famously described as an aura by Walter Benjamin, who compared it to an *Umzirkung*,[37] and when associated with the Christian saints, it has been literally depicted as a golden nimbus or halo. As is well known, painters have rendered this as a glow emanating from the saint's head, a simple glowing ring of light hovering above it, or – as was more common during earlier periods – a disk of gold leaf fitted around the head. In *The Coming Community*, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben dedicates a brief, captivating chapter on Thomas Aquinas's discussion of halos;[38] according to St. Thomas, they should be regarded as a form of surplus (*superaddi*), as an extra that makes the blessed object more brilliant (*clarior*). Coming close to the notion of a bonus, Aquinas refers to this extra as a "reward," or what Agamben calls "the vibration of that which is perfect, the glow at its edges," and – even more closely approaching the argument of the preceding paragraphs – "an indetermination of its limits."[39] Here, a conceptual shift occurs in which indetermination, which is generally categorized as potential – a force that is *under way*, to be determined – no longer occurs in time but in space

and thereby shifts from a state of being-not-yet to being-too-much, with beauty becoming a force that is *moving away* from the determined state. Or, in Agamben's words: "One can think of the halo … as a zone in which possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality, become indistinguishable."[40] A striking thought, since I know of no other examples of the conflation of these two terms in philosophy. Potential, like its twin brother the virtual, usually precedes the actual: for something to exist, there must be (or have been) the potential for it to exist. In contrast to this virtual potentiality that mediates between inexistence and existence, the halo's actual potentiality mediates between existence and coexistence. For something to exist, there must be the potential for it to exist *with others*, which, by the way, does not imply existence with others is already actual – the connections are not established yet. Rather, it means that things need to offer something and to exist superactually *toward others*. The best way to explain the rays of radiance is to imagine them as "half-relations," as relations emanating from an object that have not yet connected to other things (see fig. 3b). And they are not a few; they are abundant, like hairs on a head – and some are short and engaged in defining the object, while some are long and blur its contours. Therefore, in our encounters with beauty there is always more than we can actually deal with, but in contrast to virtual potentiality, it has already realized itself: the more is *there*. When reciprocating beauty, we merely place some – not all – of it back in time, making it circulate *now*. The superactual, then, is a form of space, and the actual a form of time. Space, similarly to our earlier findings on the public space of the *polis*, is a product of beauty.

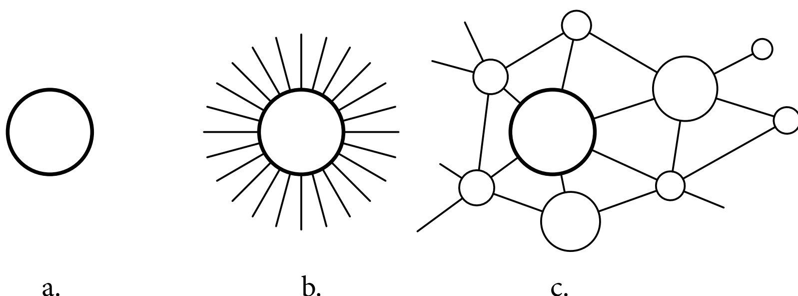

Fig. 3. Three notions of existence: a. things as cut off; b. things as radiant; c. things as related. The second, in-between state allows things to be discrete as well as outwardly oriented.

Sifting further through the history of art, and beyond, we quickly find more examples of the aesthetic object exceeding itself: for instance, in the form of bloom, which we encounter in multiple variations in reference to youth, to springtime, to adventure, and to ornament and abundance. Crispin Sartwell investigates the "six names of beauty" in his excellent book of that title,[41] and one of them is the Hebrew term *yapha*, which can mean radiance as well as bloom, which Sartwell associates with scent-exuding flowers as much as with scintillating fireworks and gems. Though it is perhaps a superfluous remark, we should bear in mind that flowers are beautiful because they have formally assimilated radiance by organizing themselves radially. Along with the hair-covered head, the flower is among the few examples of proper halos in nature, and if we allow a slightly broader definition, so are sunsets, songs and snow. The covering of brides and victors (as well as objects of festivities, such as houses or temples) with flowers, wreaths and garlands has been a custom for almost three millennia, directly linking beauty to flourishing and bloom.[42] Ornament, of course, is bloom, the flourishing of a thing, and, as John Ruskin argued,[43] ornamentation is a form of sacrifice, a spending that goes beyond reason, logic or use, wholly in line with our notion of beauty as a gift. Similarly, the English art theorist Adrian Stokes speaks of "stone bloom"[44] and, in the same breath, of luminosity, which brings us back to light. And philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly speak of "shining things,"[45] in an admirable attempt to revive Heidegger's concepts of *Leuchten* and *Scheinen* – though they heavily rely on terminology such as "awe," "sacred" and "overwhelming,"[46] fundamentally confusing beauty with sublimity, as scholars so often do. Of course, nothing shines more than gold, and, in its wake, blondness, a phenomenon that conveniently developed into fairness. In early medieval philosophy, all being had the nature of light, as exemplified by Plotinus' notion of beauty as emanation and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's *claritas*,[47] or brilliance, a concept that six hundred years later strongly influenced Thomas Aquinas and the project of the Gothic, with its breathtaking stained-glass windows and book illuminations.

But the strongest connection between giving, light and flourishing urges us to return to the Three Graces, or, as they were known in ancient Greece, the Three Charites. The Charites' connotations of light and radiance are considerably older even than their later breakdown into three distinct god-

desses. According to some sources, the origin probably lies with the "bright horses of the sun,"[48] for which the Vedic poets used the Sanskrit name Haritas, a divine force that was part of a larger earth religion that related the rays of the sun to natural fertility and growth. This divinity was inherited by early mystery cults in a still-agricultural Greece, first simply as Charis and later as three distinct dancing figures, of whom Aglaia adopted the status of the radiant one; we encounter her this way in Hesiod[49] and Pindar,[50] next to her sisters Euphrosyne and Thalia. Briefly put, the cycle of sunset and sunrise slowly became the dance of the Three Charites, eventually turning into the gift cycle; we find this interpretation of the Three Graces in Aristotle[51] and later in Seneca who – indirectly – connects Aglaia with the giving of the gift, Euphrosyne with its receipt, and Thalia with its return.[52]

Though we see the term *charis* turning up again and again in the epics, where objects and actions alike are described in terms of shining and glistening, whether they be favorable acts toward others, sacrifices on the battlefield, acts of kindness, anointed bodies or gleaming garments, we encounter the Charites themselves in the context of what we identified as the extra and the bonus when discussing St. Thomas's *superaddi* of halos. The Charites should be understood as the personification and circulation of effects involving *charis*. While the Charites almost exclusively deal with the practices of beauty (dance, adornment, singing, etc.), they are to be viewed in the much wider context of kindness, bravery, sacrifice, fame and friendliness. Though much has been said about the topic, the radicalness of the Charites acting as the model of *charis* has gone mainly unnoticed. The appropriate question to ask ourselves is why the term *charis* is used for such a vast range of sociable acts while the Charites spend all their time working on their makeup (and that of others). My claim, again, is that the fundamental relation between them doesn't mean beauty is ultimately of a social nature but exactly the opposite: all acts of bonding are both regulated by the spheres of beauty and exceeded by them. Understanding things necessitates the understanding of beauty, but the interaction of things necessitates it even more. The Charites sing during festivities, they dance undressed but dress other goddesses, they bring roses and garlands and, in particular, they adorn the divine with jewelry – a golden necklace and a diadem for Pandora, a spiralling bracelet for the arm of Aphrodite, dangling earrings for Hera – along with an endless list of perfumes, gleaming veils, silver mantles, purple

robes, anointments, and hairdos. Western metaphysics has notoriously failed to come to grips with the nature of adornment, classifying it – either positively or negatively – under the rubric of illusions and masks, thinking the *superaddi* covers up some true natural state. But superaddition is not concealment. Rather, we should view adornment as an exponent of the saltational principle, each part (superactually) leaping from the object without (actually) leaving its origin. I am opting for a metaphysics of adornment.[53] Jewelry superadds to each motion of the body an extra movement, to each turn of Hera's head an extra swing of her earrings, to each movement of Aphrodite's arm the sparkling and tinkling of the golden bracelet, to each gesture of a hand the flash of a ring. And the same applies to makeup, perfume, hairdos, garments: the gleaming of the eyes is enhanced – *heightened* – by eyeliner and eyeshadow; the speaking and breathing of the mouth by lipstick; the motion of the head is enhanced by the movement of curls and tresses; the walking of the body by the moving folds and shifting layers of cloth; a person's passing by enhanced by leaving a trail of fragrance. Last but not least, we should recognize the smile as the apex of radiance, superadding the brightness of teeth – compared to pearls by so many poets[54] – to the beaming of a face.

Most of the above takes place in the realm of Aglaia – of *aglaa dora*,[55] shining gifts – but to get the full picture, we need to finally attend to her sisters Euphrosyne and Thalia. Oddly enough, not much has been written on these two as distinct from their more famous sister. It goes without saying that to truly understand the nature of beauty, *charis* and the cycle of gift exchange we need to conceptualize Euphrosyne and Thalia at least as clearly as we did Aglaia. Euphrosyne's name carries similar meanings such as joy, mirth, merriment, pleasure, or glee, which relates to gladness; *glad* means smooth in some languages (such as Dutch and German), or, again, bright. Any of these words indicates that she personifies a feeling. Let us keep in mind that *chara* literally means "joy" and *charein* "to rejoice,"[56] and that *charis*, as it appears in the epics, just as often carries the meaning of joy as it does that of favor, recompense or beauty. If Euphrosyne connotes joy, how does that connect to her acting as the recipient, as the second stage in the cycle of giving, receiving and returning? This will be our main question to tackle. In an analysis of these figures, there is danger in falling back on the informational model of a sender and a receiver by regarding Aglaia as the repre-

sentative of the objective aspects of beauty and Euphrosyne of the subjective ones and subsequently claiming that somehow object and subject are merged by the cycle. If only things were that easy. Certainly, the nature of the cycle must play a key role in any analysis, but not simply through a bending of the linear model with the nature of the agents kept intact. The participants in the cycle are completely different from those playing their parts in the linear model of information exchange. Concerning the nature of the cycle, we decided early on that it involved distributed ownership. Gifts are inalienable; they can be neither owned nor wholly appropriated. And to illustrate that, the sphere of the gift was described as elastic. Peculiar as it may seem, the image of elasticity can help us understand why objects suddenly involve feelings; that is, why the cycle of goods can be understood as aesthetic and vice versa.

When we apply the image of elasticity and picture the giver as deforming itself, thinly stretching out into the shape of a gift by partially extruding into space, then surely the recipient can likewise be pictured as deforming itself into the shape of, say, a bag or a mouth to encapsulate that gift. In this sense, the term "reception" doesn't fully cover what is occuring at Euphrosyne's position, since the act of reception is extended by acceptance – or acception, which is definitive and decisive, certainly when compared to perception, the concept usually employed in relation to beauty. To "perceive" means something you "take at a distance," while to "accept" means to "take in." Perception is critical, while acception is absolutely uncritical, without (Kantian) judgment. In keeping things at a distance, perception and criticality can never explain why beauty is felt, whereas in fact beauty is felt before it is seen. To feel joy means to share the space of the given object by "taking in" the gift. While the given is an externalization, a shedding of properties, a *superaddi*, the received is an internalization, a swallowing, which makes acception first and foremost a feeling, since an object assimilated by the body is not seen but felt. For psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, *every* feeling of enjoyment is connected with gratitude,[57] framed within the mother-infant relationship, a connection made through nourishment, as we saw in the example of milk and suckling. Seeing joy as a derivative of gratitude draws feeling into a wholly nonsubjective realm. We take in food in the same way that we take pleasure in something – the receptivity of the recipient implies a certain openness, if not proper hunger or thirst.[58] Thinking of the gift ex-

change, one would assume the gift necessarily constitutes an actual object, but such objecthood is wholly dependent on, if not secondary to, the feeling of gratification, personified by this strangely lighthearted party girl named Euphrosyne, who is always ready to dance and drink. In one of the few remaining depictions of her, in a Roman mosaic from the first century AD, we find her lying on a couch holding out her cup to Akratos, the spirit of drinking, who fills it with an elegant arc spouting from his golden horn.[59] What is being held out, and by and to whom? Is it her welcoming cup or his overflowing horn of plenty? The fact that we cannot say is telling enough.

We swallow to turn objects into feelings, and we discharge to turn feelings back into objects. In short, I assert that (a) the bare fact that we have any feelings at all is due to our participation in the cycle of beauty; greed or frugality should be considered obstructions of the cycle (through either swallowing too much or not discharging enough[60]); and (b) the fact that the cycle involves feelings as much as objects historically allowed the gift exchange of actual goods to transform into the exchange of beauty. That doesn't make beauty illusory or unreal, on the contrary. When we go back for a moment to the very beginning of this essay, back to the forest, the green leaves and the pear hinted at by the scotch, we now understand that an object shedding its properties sheds them as real objects, not as percepts or representations of objects. We physically take in the part when we partake or participate in the exchange of beauty. The fact that beauty is a broadening of gift exchange implies it remained an exchange of real objects, and even though there is no exchange of matter, these objects are swallowed and taken in. The American philosopher Guy Sircello called this "expansion," referring to the fact that we are "filled" with the beauty of a landscape or the sweetness of a melody.[61] In this regard, I'd be very hesitant to say we own our feelings. It would be better to think of feeling as a way for objects to appear in us[62] – when we "open up" to things during the act of acceptance, we are in fact extending the reach of public space. Aesthetics has too easily come to mean the sensualization of the subject, if not a complete subjectification of beauty in the manner of Hume and Kant – as if we can project any sense of beauty onto anything; for that view, you would have to firmly shut your eyes to almost everything else that occurs in the cycle, leaving out the transcendence of the object, leaving out the saltational principle, leaving out the distributed

ownership of properties, and, of course, leaving out the final stage of the return, the counter-gift.

The third role, Thalia's, was an equally brilliant invention of the Greeks. The first thing to note – other than the fact that the name Thalia means "flourishing" or "blooming," implying growth – is that Thalia was also later known as Thallo, one of the Horai, the Hour of Spring, the goddess of the spring season. The Horai and the Charites are closely associated in Greek mythology; it is Thallo, for instance, who jumps forward with the flowered mantle to cover the naked Aphrodite in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. The Horai are involved as much in the cycles of life, the seasons, as in determining the right moment to act. To put it concisely, with Thalia the gift cycle switches from the space phase to the time phase: it's now that beauty makes things start to happen. The blooming of Thalia occurs in time, which means that although beauty shines in the superactual, it can only be reciprocated in the actual moment. The feelings of gratitude and joy which we located at the position of Euphrosyne now start to provoke an increase, a growth, which may be the youth of an adolescent, the blooming of a flower, the fertility of the land, the prosperity of a family, the wealth of a city – all, without exception, forms of plenty and abundance. As Melanie Klein puts it in *Envy and Gratitude*:

> Gratitude is closely bound up with generosity. Inner wealth derives from having assimilated the good object so that the individual becomes able to share its gifts with others. This makes it possible to introject a more friendly outer world, and a feeling of enrichment ensues.[63]

The passage in the cycle from Aglaia to Euphrosyne is instigated by generosity, and from Euphrosyne to Thalia by gratitude, and from Thalia back to Aglaia by enrichment. How different the triadist model of the Graces is from the dualist models of beauty! Dualisms can at best be reconciled, while the circle merely has to be closed. Therefore, enjoyment should not be simply understood as a form of aesthetic pleasure, which would turn Euphrosyne's position into that of a terminus, but as a thoroughfare to enrichment and growth. It is not enough for beauty to be internalized; it needs to be transformative to be reciprocated. Thalia returns the gift by be-

coming beautiful and radiant herself, through an overflowing and flourishing, which again occurs in space. When Euphrosyne personifies the swallowing of the object by turning it into feeling, Thalia stands for the discharging of that feeling back into the object. While in the gift exchange one returns the actual gift or an equivalent, in beauty exchange we offer ourselves as counter-gift, i.e., as radiant. Between blocks of beauty, we find flows of time to make changes, to make progress, whatever – periods of high risk, when things can turn out ugly. In any case, Thalia is doing well, if not extremely so, and this is what Klein alludes to with the "good object," a very fitting term. Philosophers have always struggled with the relationship of beauty to the good and the true, but many of their conclusions have proved unsustainable. It has been suggested that the beautiful is only beautiful if it is morally correct, or politically correct, or ethically proper, or in some other way references the massive archives of righteousness elevated far above us. That is not what good means. Good means beneficial: it helps you to be. Beauty is favorable; beauty is healthy. It helps you to walk down the street,[64] to talk to others; it helps you to be convincing, to make things, to solve problems; it helped Greek soldiers to fight their battles; it helps a leopard to kill; it helped Helen of Troy to start a war; it helps everyone with anything. Beauty has no particular interest in the Good. It doesn't help good things to be; *it helps things to be well*, i.e., it helps them to act and to move, with agility and with grace. Beauty is a radical form of alleviation or relief. In this regard, beauty can be considered as prosthetic, having as much the nature of a contrivance as of an adornment;[65] a twin phenomenon of a type we recognize from the works of Hephaistos, the crippled god who forged golden automata that looked like maidens to assist him, merging the prosthetic with the mimetic. It is no accident that he was both crippled and married to Aglaia. Her beauty, and the beauty of the things he makes, restores his mobility; it heals him and does him good. To be sure, we often speak of the good as a moral code for our actions, but we also speak of goods to mean a flow of merchandise, we say "Good!" to express approval of the way things are going, and we speak of people being "good at" what they're doing to praise them for excellence, not moral behaviour. The good is first and foremost a qualification of movement, which evidently takes place in the actual. The good belongs to the actual in the way that beauty belongs

to the superactual, which makes the good a function of beauty, not the reverse.

With Thalia, things go from good to better, since ultimately it is enrichment that enables the exchange. To be returned into the hands of Aglaia, the temporal phase of growth needs to turn into a spatial object of bloom, as if a movie is suddenly being played in slow motion – the very same "slow Time" of Keats in "Ode on a Grecian Urn"[66] – turning the momentary formlessness of transformation into a form of pure radiation. This is the whole reason why, for example, so many photos are taken of sunsets. Time seemingly keeps passing, but from the viewpoint of beauty, all has come to a halt, which marks the moment to push the button. Does this, in the end, make Thalia into a copy of Aglaia? Is the gift cycle a mechanism by which beauty reproduces itself? In a way, yes, though Thalia is no carbon copy. She needs to match the beauty of Aglaia, or else there is no return of the gift. The circle of movement can only be closed by the matching of the starting and ending points; that is, by stoppage. Surely, this is inherent to a cycle; it denotes the collapse of the distinction between progress and standstill, between movement and arrest and, more importantly, as Nietzsche said, between becoming and being.[67] Consequently, it turns Aglaia into a belated recipient as well, and since a recipient is the seat of feeling, the question becomes one of what exactly she feels. According to Epicurus and Goethe, it is the pleasure of giving itself,[68] which means that, when we apply our definition of feeling as the appearance of an internal object, Aglaia now suddenly sees herself in the mirror as a stranger, realizing in shock that beauty cannot be owned by anyone or anything and is a stranger to its own object.

notes

1. Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2005), 58 and passim.
2. Charles Darwin, *The Annotated Origin: A Facsimile of the First Edition of On the Origin of Species*, annotated by James Costa (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2009), 194. Quoted by Leibniz in his *New Essays* IV, 16.
3. A similar argument was made by Guy Sircello in his unique *A New Theory of Beauty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). Sircello based his theory on the connection between the medieval concept of *claritas* (or radiance) and what he called "properties of qualitative degree" (PQDs). I only partially follow him in this matter, since I trace the notion of radiance further back to the ancient mythology of Aglaia and her sister Charites and subsequently frame radiance within gift theory. Although I admire his radically anti-subjectivist stance on beauty, my theory is grounded in the apparent paradox between "property" and "gift."

4. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007 [1979]). Stephen David Ross, *The Gift of Beauty: The Good as Art* (New York: SUNY, 1996).
5. Introduction to Mauss' *The Gift* in: Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (London: Routledge, 1990), vii.
6. See "The three obligations: to give, to receive, to reciprocate" in: Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, 39–43.
7. Mauss, *The Gift,* 3 (my translation of "Quelle force y a-t-il dans la chose qu'on donne qui fait que le donataire la rend?").
8. Mauss, *The Gift*, 12.
9. Annette Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping while Giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), and Maurice Godelier, *The Engima of the Gift*, transl. Nora Scott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
10. Seneca, *On Benefits* I, 3. See note 52.
11. Mauss, *The Gift*, 3, and again on 38.
12. Godelier, *The Engima of the Gift*, 163.
13. Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1972), 193–96.
14. Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude* (London: Virago Press, 1988), Chapter Ten.
15. In his *Politik und Anmut*, classicist Christian Meier calls beauty the "Greek miracle," while Michel Foucault speaks of an "aesthetics of existence" in a similar context (*The Courage of Truth*, 161–64). Despite its small size, Meier's *Politik und Anmut* (WJS Corso, 1985) has been very influential in this discussion. For more on the connection between exchange and beauty, see: Bonnie MacLachlan, *The Age of Grace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) and Arpad Szalkolczai, *Sociology, Religion and Grace* (London: Routledge, 2007), Part I.
16. Carl Kerényi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), Chapter Two.
17. Bonnie MacLachlan, *The Age of Grace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 11.
18. As suggested by Hannah Arendt in 1954, then articulated by Christian Meier in 1985 (p. 43: "Auf dieser Weise wäre Anmut in die Konstitution der Öffentlichkeit, in die Grundlagen des Zusammenlebens eingegangen"), and later adopted by Marcel Hénaff in his 2002 *The Price of Truth* and by Arpad Szalkolczai in his *Sociology, Religion and Grace* of 2007.
19. Marcel Hénaff, *The Price of Truth*, Chapter Seven, "The Paradoxes of Grace," esp. "Kharis and Polis," 246–52. Hénaff bases his argument on a reading of Meier's *Politik und Anmut*, and in addition on Hannah Arendt's *Between Past and Future*.
20. MacLachlan, *The Age of Grace*, 21–34.
21. *Odyssey* 6.231.
22. *Iliad* 14.182 and *Odyssey* 18.298.
23. Friedrich Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity," in: *Schiller's "On Grace and Dignity" in Its Cultural Context*, eds. Jane Curran and Christopher Fricker (New York: Camden House, 2005), 125 [italics removed]. Cf. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: "Schönheit in Bewegung," in: *Sämmtliche Schriften,* Vol. 6, XXI, 499.
24. Quoted from Henri Bergson's lecture on Félix Ravaisson published in *The Creative Mind*, transl. M. Andison (New York: Dover, 2007), 207.
25. *Theogony*, 945: "And Hephaestus, the famous Lame One, made Aglaea, youngest of the Graces, his buxom wife."
26. *Iliad* 18.382–83. Besides having a different name, she operates on her own in *The Iliad*, without her two sisters, Euphrosyne and Thalia.
27. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York and London: Penguin, 2006), 43–52, 63–4.
28. One of the main arguments in Annette Weiner's *Inalienable Possessions*, later taken up by Maurice Godelier in *The Enigma of the Gift*. Both are deeply indebted to Roger Caillois' 1959 *Man and the Sacred* (Illinois, 2001).
29. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Verso, 1994), Chapter Two, "The Plane of Immanence." My argument here is that even if the world consists of one layer, it is still stratified.

30. For Kierkegaard it meant that faith could only come suddenly, not gradually (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*), similarly, I guess, to the way we "fall" in love, or to Man's fall from grace, or to the way one starts a lecture: it cannot be done without leaping into it.
31. Rilke, *Duino Elegies*: "beauty is nothing / but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure."
32. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, 2 vols. (New York: Zone Books, 1983 and 1988).
33. The phrase "je ne sais quoi" appears first in Italian, in Agnolo Firenzuola's *On the Beauty of Women* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992, orig. 1541. See p. 35), who calls this cloud a "vaghezza" (36), which means vagueness or indeterminacy as well as grace or charm. The term was later adopted by Dominique Bouhours as "je ne sçay quoy" in *Les Entretiens d'Artiste et d'Eugène* in 1671. See Samuel Monk, "A Grace Beyond the Reach of Art," *Journal of the History of Ideas,* vol. 5, no. 2 (1944).
34. For a discussion of bird's nests, see my *The Sympathy of Things*, 66; and for bungee jumping, 319.
35. Heidegger famously distinguished between *Zuhandenheit* (readiness-to-hand, "being handy") and *Vorhandenheit* (presentness-at-hand, "being at hand"). The first is accompanied by an invisibility, since things, when caught up in the rhythms of usage and work, are not consciously paid attention to but exist as hidden or veiled, while the second entails a return to visibility, for instance when a thing is broken or not in use. See Graham Harman, "Technology, Objects and Things in Heidegger," *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 34, no. 1 (January 2010). In these paragraphs I use similar phrasing to Harman's for the opposite argument: excess is not a form of withdrawal but of generosity. Withdrawal accumulates into essence, but since it is unknowable and hidden, it necessarily takes on the form of the gap, an "absence-at-hand," or, if you don't mind the pun, an *Abhandenheit*. Heidegger, of course, was obsessed by the gap: the essence of *Heim* was the *Unheimlich*; that of *Grund* was the *Abgrund*; the essence of the jug was the void, and that of *Lichtung* wasn't radiance but the clearing (the gap in the forest). As a result, the fundamental mood of being turns into anxiety, which in the end is an aesthetic of the sublime, not of beauty.
36. Cf. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 78: "Nature is beautiful in that it appears to say more than it is. To wrest this more from more's contigency, to gain control of its semblance, to determine it as semblance as well as to negate it as unreal: this is the idea of art. That substance could be totally null, and still the artworks could posit a more as what it appears. Artworks become artworks in the production of this more; they produce their own transcendence, rather than being its arena, and thereby they once again become separated from transcendence." On the following page, Adorno refers to Benjamin's concept of the aura as being similar to his notion of the more.
37. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," transl. Harry Zohn and Edmund Jephcott (SW 4, 253–56). Also see the discussion of *Schein* (semblance, shine) in the text on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. "[G]enuine aura appears in all things, not just in certain kinds of things," in: "Protocols of Drug Experiments," *On Hashish*, transl. Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 58. The fact that Benjamin experiences an aura around objects while high fits with Huxley's descriptions in *Heaven and Hell* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956) of the radiance observed during his mescaline sessions. The best definition of the aura that Benjamin offers states that the object has "the ability to look back at us" ("Little History of Photography"). Note the distinction between the haptic notion of giving and the optic notion of looking. Benjamin's *Umzirkung* are the rays emitting from an object as it looks back, not the hands, as in the "handing over" of the gift.
38. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, transl. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minn. Press, 2005), 54. Agamben develops this into "a paradoxical individuation by indetermination," thereby shifting the notion of the individual thing from Aquinas' own *quidditas* (whatness) to Scotus' *haecceitas* (thisness). And he adds, "The halo is this supplement added to perfection – something like the vibration of that which is perfect, the glow at its edges." The original Aquinas quote reads: "beatitudo includit in se omnia bona quae sunt necessaria ad perfectam hominis vitam, quae consistit in perfecta hominis operatione; sed quaedam possunt superaddi non quasi

necessaria ad perfectam operationem, ut sine quibus esse non possit, sed quia his additis est beatitudo clarior" (*Scriptum super Sententiis*, 4.49.5, *Opera Omnia*).

39. Ibid., 55. We find the same notion of "gratuitous surplus" and "something more" in Plotinus and Ravaisson, who both define it as grace. See: Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 50.
40. Agamben, 55.
41. Crispin Sartwell, *Six Names of Beauty* (New York: Routledge, 2006), Chapter Two, "Yapha," 27–56.
42. A custom known as phyllobolia.
43. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (Sunnyside: George Allen, 1880). Walter Benjamin also compared his notion of the aura to ornament: "the distinctive feature of genuine aura is ornament, an ornamental halo [*Umzirkung*] in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case" (*On Hashish*, 58).
44. Adrian Stokes, *The Stones of Rimini* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).
45. Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011).
46. Some examples are "Homer's Greeks were brought to a state of reverential awe when they were in the presence of anything that was beautiful in the highest degree" (*All Things Shining,* 85) and "[A]bout the sacred moments in sport … in the truly extraordinary moments, something overwhelming occurs. It wells up and carries you along as on a powerful wave" (199).
47. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names* (Fintry Brook: Shrine of Wisdom, 1980). He uses the Greek term *aglaia*, which is translated into Latin as *claritas*. See: Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics, Vol. II: Medieval Aesthetics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 30.
48. See: Fr. Max Müller, *Theosophy*, 79. Also, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, 404–13. Bourgeaud and MacLachlan disagree; see: "Les Kharites et la Lumière" (*Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 63 (1985), 5–14. Though Müller's theory is disputed, it is quite certain the Charites have a non-Greek origin, going even beyond the Egyptian roots of Herodotes (see Barbara Breitenberger, *Aphrodite and Eros*, Chapter Five).
49. *Theogony* 907ff.
50. *Olympian Ode* 14.5ff.
51. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 5, 1133a: "… This is why we set up a shrine of the Graces in a public place, to remind men to return a kindness; for that is a special characteristic of grace, since it is a duty not only to repay a service done one, but another time to take the initiative in doing a service oneself."
52. Seneca, *On Benefits*, I, 3, on the same page: "… there is one who bestows a benefit, one who receives it, and a third who returns it … [Hesiod] named the eldest Aglaia, the middle one Euphrosyne, the third Thalia." See also Karl Deichgräber, *Charis und Chariten, Grazie und Grazien* (Munich: Heimeran Verlag, 1971), 56. Deichgräber's little book is one of the best on the topic of the Graces. Another is Erkinger Schwarzenberg's *Die Grazien* (Habelt, 1966), and also useful is the entry on *charis* and the Chariten in W.H. Roscher's 1884 *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, 873–84. Another valuable nineteenth-century source is Heinrich Krause's *Musen, Grazien, Horen, und Nymphen* of 1871. Alongside Bonnie MacLachlan's excellent *The Age of Grace* and Arpad Szalkolczai's *Sociology, Religion and Grace*, there are a number of more contemporary publications of great interest: Veronika Mertens' *Die drei Grazien* (Harrosowitz, 1994), Barbara Breitenberger's *Aphrodite and Eros* (Routledge, 2007) and Beate Wagner-Hasel's *Der Stoff der Gaben* (Campus, 2000). All texts on the Three Graces describe them as personifying giving, accepting and returning (or thanking) as well as radiance, joy and bloom via their names, Aglaia, Euphrosyne and Thalia. That is, some emphasize the ethical nature of the Charites, others the aesthetic one. However, there are hardly any texts that combine the two readings to say that giving equates to radiance, accepting equates to joy and returning equates to bloom – one of the main theses of this essay. Seneca comes closest; the Roman statesman-philosopher based his comments on the thought of the Hellenistic philosopher Chrysippus (*Peri Charitōn*, "On the Graces," a text that has been lost), who, as Erkinger Schwarzenberg concludes, was the first to relate the Three Graces to the giving, receiving and returning of the gift (*Die Grazien*, 72).

53. This differs from – noteworthy – philosophies of adornment or clothing such as we find in Thomas Carlyle and Georg Simmel. A philosophy is a theory, including technical terms that refer to one another, which constructs a systematized thought *on* a topic – in their case, fashion or adornment. A "metaphysics of adornment" claims adorning *itself* as a philosophy, conflating the realms of the sensuous (adorning) and the mind (metaphysics). It takes the model of adornments such as jewelry and pendants as a model of existence of all things, including unadorned ones – this in contrast to a sociology. However, Simmel's theories on adornment are very close to the ones that are developed here: "One may speak of human radioactivity in the sense that every individual is surrounded by a larger or smaller sphere of significance radiating from him; and everybody else, who deals with him, is immersed in this sphere" (*The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 339).
54. Cf. Robert Browning, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*: "With rosy cheeks and flaxen curls, / And sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls, / Tripping and skipping, ran merrily after / The wonderful music with shouting and laughter."
55. *Iliad* 1.212–14.
56. Carl Kerenyi, *The Gods of the Greeks* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 101.
57. Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 187–90. With this concept of happiness and gratification, she broadens Freud's idea of sexual enjoyment as being derived from the infant-breast relationship (*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*) to include all forms of enjoyment.
58. "Hunger" is a term used by Levinas to distinguish his notion of being from Heidegger's, but it fails to establish a cycle in his philosophy. Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969 [1961]): "In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone." And, in *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996): "As consumable, [the world] is nourishment, and in enjoyment, it offers itself, gives itself, belongs to me" – this is the taker's view, not that of the one who returns.
59. In the collection of the Gaziantep Museum, Gaziantep, Turkey.
60. In Melanie Klein's terms, respectively "to introject" and "to project," her versions of Freud's oral and anal phases.
61. Sircello, *A New Theory of Beauty*, 20.
62. Consequently, it is vital to make felt objects leave our bodies again by reciprocation, which constitutes the third phase of the cycle, or else the object turns into a possessive fetish, and feelings into obsessions. Possession plays a major role in the pathology of beauty as an unrecycled form.
63. Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 189.
64. See my *The Sympathy of Things*, 304–5.
65. Hephaistos has many traits of Daidalos, who is of later origin. For a similar connection between contrivance and adornment, see my *The Sympathy of Things*, 279. More importantly, see: Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, *Dédale: Mythologie de l'artisan en Grèce ancienne* (Paris: Maspero, 1975), 68–73
66. The first two sentences go: "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness, / thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time …"
67. Nietzsche, *Wille zur Macht,* nr. 617 (Edition Kröner, 1930): "… eternal recurrence is the closest possible approximation of a world of becoming to that of being." Quoted in Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 42.
68. Epicurus, *On Gifts and Gratitude*, 544 (quoted in Deichgräber, 54: "Das Wohltun, sagt er, ist im Vergleich zum Guten, was man empfängt, nicht nur schöner, sondern auch erfreulicher: denn nichts spendet so viel Freude wie Charis, das Gefälligsein, Schenken."). And: "Nur der ist froh, der geben mag," from J.W. Goethe's *Faust*, Part One, Sc. II.

What if beauty has an outspoken social function and is even a primary necessity in life? Reimar Schefold (b. 1939) is an anthropologist who spent many years among the Sakuddei on Siberut, a small island off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia, where he researched their tribal life in the tropical rainforest, including their view that everything has a soul that is "free to wander as it wishes." The creation of beauty is a way for the Sakuddei to keep the souls connected to the bodies of the tribe's men and women. Schefold is a professor emeritus of the cultural anthropology and sociology of Indonesia at Leiden University. His special interests are thematic symbolic anthropology, cultural materialism, vernacular architecture and social change among ethnic minorities. Schefold has authored and coauthored numerous books. "Framing Indonesian Realities: Essays in Symbolic Anthropology in Honour of Reimar Schefold" is a 2004 compilation of essays written by others that touch upon the subjects Schefold studied for 35 years while living among the various cultural groups of Indonesia. In 2012, Schefold published a first-person account of his years with the Sakuddei, "Wees goed voor je ziel" (Be good to your soul).

without beauty, our souls are lost

An Interview with Reimar Schefold by Arjen Mulder

A.M: At the beginning of your career, you spent two years (1967–1969) living with the Sakuddei, an isolated hunter-gatherer tribe, in the still more or less virgin forest on Pulau Siberut, one of the Mentawai Islands off Sumatra, Indonesia. On this visit, you laid the foundations for your later academic career. In your account of the journey published in 2012, "Wees goed voor je ziel" (Be good to your soul), you describe your adventures among these people, who seem to have admitted you into their circle without any problems, despite vast cultural differences. How did it work? Were you simply a guest of the Sakuddei without doing anything in return? Or did they expect anything of you, and if so, what? I assume you didn't give them any money, but in that case, who paid for your food, for example?

RS: It was naturally expected that I contributed as far as I was able to. At feasts, instead of providing pigs, which I didn't have, I brought things like tobacco, chopping knives and mosquito netting, which I bought from Malayan traders. And since they always saw me writing, they decided this was my contribution to the communal activities, and left me to it. It was unthinkable that I'd show up empty-handed when everyone knew I had things of my own. And I had to make sure no one went short, so as not to cause tension. I had to do the same thing when I went home and left behind things I'd brought with me that I thought they could use.

How do the Sakuddei deal with gifts in general, both inside the tribe and with external groups?

The Sakuddei have a definite idea of quid pro quo. Inside the family, people don't look at value; you receive and reciprocate according to convenience. It's the same within the group, as long as it's clear that you're contributing what you're able to. But between different groups, a principle of equal reciprocity certainly applies. You're supposed to give back something equivalent to what you've received, otherwise you're placed in a dependent position. You see this very clearly with entertaining. If you invite someone over and entertain them lavishly, they notice what you've contributed, and it's expected that those guests will provide the same amount next time they give a party – not less, because then they'd remain in debt, but not more, either, because that would mean they were looking to outdo the other person and embarrass them. In the years after I first visited, there were various projects that led to the Mentawai people suddenly receiving things from outside. At a certain point, I noticed they were becoming suspicious: wasn't this putting them in a dependent position? In a flash of inspiration, remembering the time when the island was under Dutch rule, I told the Mentawai people we'd received many riches from them back then and had suddenly realized we should give something back. Their reaction was one of relief – yes, it certainly was high time we did that!

How do they deal with rivalry, both inside the group and with other groups?

Rivalry between groups is a central issue. In my book I describe the custom of the *pakò*. Since there's no coordinating organization and every group has to independently manage its relationship with the neighbors, you risk the unacceptable situation of people immediately starting a fight whenever there's a disagreement. The *pakò* is a conflict in which two groups provoke and ridicule each other for some time, until they reach a critical moment when there's no going back. Then you have to choose either to radically break off the conflict and make peace or to have an overt outburst and a fight. In a *pakò*, the point is to outdo your opponents with extravagant achievements, embarrassing them and at the same time increasing your own prestige. A member of the group who develops exceptional qualities gains esteem, but if he thinks mainly about his own interests, it can lead to conflict and, in the worst-case scenario, to the group splitting up.

Did you become part of any rivalries that came up, or did you have to choose sides in existing conflicts?

There was a lot of tension between the Sakuddei – who'd moved to a remote new location in response to oppressive government measures not long before I came – and their neighbors, who'd been established there for longer. In being accepted by the Sakuddei, I shared in their internal solidarity but was less welcomed by groups they were in conflict with.

So rivalries arise within and between tribes or groups on the basis of differences in prestige and status? Or are there groups that have been quarreling forever?

That can happen – that a group once had a dispute with another group, and that conflict has been inherited. They used to be headhunters. So everyone knows your group once went hunting in another valley – never in its own valley – and killed someone there. You'd bring the person's head straight home, and you'd carve figures representing the deceased. I bought one from an uma longhouse outside my own Sakuddei group. This uma that had a panel with a figure of a murdered shaman had fallen into disrepair, and I said, "Can I take this?" And they said, "OK. Then you can tell other people how we live. But don't ever show it to anybody from the area where that man came from – you can tell the region by the tattoos – or you could get in trouble." A murder like that goes back generations, but the score remains unsettled, as it were.

At one point, you describe how two families or tribes are negotiating with each other because of a marriage. They're driving each other crazy as one tries to get the biggest possible dowry from the other. What values are in play for the negotiators in this "trade system"?

The goal is to collect as many beautiful and attractive things as possible around you. Durian trees are an example. Everyone loves the taste of the fruit. So they haggle like crazy over a particular durian tree that the bride-giver wants. The boy's family refuses, and they offer another durian tree, but it isn't anywhere near as good, and so on. If they do manage to get the de-

sired tree, that doesn't mean they'll be eating the fruit all the time. I saw durians rotting on the ground. They're basically status symbols. So are the *ngongs*. Those are the only articles of exchange that they use as such. They used to get them from the Malayans. You buy these gongs using rattan and lianas, which are a kind of commodity, or coconuts. And people who have a lot of gongs have a lot of prestige. But they're just trying to impress others – you can't do anything with that many gongs. People are constantly striking gongs in rituals, but you only really need one. If somebody has ten, it's because of the status they confer.

> *Is status the only point? You describe how the Sakuddei decorate their big communal houses – "uma" – and smaller extensions with carved wooden birds with characteristic lightning-bolt wings. They also decorate their skin with distinctive tattoos and adorn themselves and their homes with flowers and paintings. They see beauty as a primary necessity in life, and their explanation is that beauty is what makes an individual tribe member's soul willing to stay with the body of its carrier and with the tribe as a whole. So why beauty?*

When you ask that specific question, you run up against the problem that the Sakuddei don't use the word "beauty" to describe their artistic creations. If we bring their concept of beauty back to the terms they use to indicate what matters in their art, we see that they use a derivative word, *malanja*, which more or less means "young" or "youthful." And yet they don't use that word for the wooden birds.

For the birds, they have two concepts. The first is that a carving is made correctly, according to tradition, the way it should be. For this, they use the word *makire*. They think carefully about how a particular object should look according to their norms. This is always a point for discussion. And if, for example, you draw them a person, as I did, they don't look at whether the shape bears a resemblance but whether the tattoos are rendered correctly. If they are, then it's *makire* – as it should be.

Then there's the second concept, *mateu. Mateu* means something like "right for its context," "suitable" or "fitting." So if you carve a huge bird out of wood and put it in a tiny house, that's not *mateu*. And if you put a small

bird in an enormous house, that's not *mateu* either. So it's about proportion. And it applies in relation to people, too. I might have something that isn't *mateu* for me, but it might be for someone else. This is linked to the idea that everything has its own soul and everything is alive. So a color, say green, might not feel comfortable with you, and that would mean it's not *mateu* for you.

Why is the soul so captivated by those wooden birds?

The birds are attractive because they're directly linked to the idea of a soul gliding and flying around. But anything beautiful is attractive to the soul. Bats are also especially appropriate. And flowers and leaves are considered beautiful. It's often natural shapes, but the ceremonial tree they use to lure spirits isn't a figurative shape but a bundle of reeds tied together and painted black and white using a special technique. They add leaves and flowers, and then gifts and offerings for the spirits.

It was hard for me to understand why they didn't use human flesh to lure the soul. Because they use monkey meat to lure monkeys. When I asked, they said, "Souls don't like human flesh." And then of course it's not pleasant cutting into your flesh. So they don't do it. They used to be headhunters, but now it's all tradition.

Do the Sakuddei talk much about beauty? For instance, about why some flowers are prettier than others?

Yes, definitely. They get very excited about things they find moving and beautiful. Once I had some cheap cotton that had a flower pattern printed on it, and a guy stood there looking at it, enraptured, and said, "How can you make something so beautiful?" Actually, he said *maeru* – good – and not *malanja. Malanja* has a connotation of exaltation. The most beautiful thing is when a bird, or whatever, is *makire*. But tribe members aren't supposed to go too far. I had a friend there, Apageire, who started elaborately sprucing up his house. And that wasn't *mateu*. He did it partly because ecotourism was starting to arrive there – this was some time after my first visit. The tourists liked the figures, so he thought maybe he could use them to attract them. I don't know whether he would have bothered to decorate like that otherwise.

The birds may be traditional, but people aren't overly worried about how they're supposed to look. They're not such magical objects that they always have to be made in exactly the same way or that they can't be taken away from the place they were originally intended for.

Oh, no. I have a bird here that a friend made for me, and it's actually not traditional. It's a standing bird; that was his idea. You do have that freedom. Creativity isn't stifled; you're not restricted to making exact copies. On the contrary, every time you make something you're creating something new and individual, so you're always confronting tradition and your material. There was a guy who wanted to make me a bird, an eagle. I have pictures of him making this eagle, and in them he looks very hesitant. And then he said, "It's going to be a dove. It wants to be a dove." So he made it a dove.

Are there people in the group who distinguish themselves as artists or excellent woodworkers and get paid for their work?

Actually, the idea is that any man can do any of the things men do. But they know one person might be better at making canoes than someone else. Maybe there's somebody in your group who's really good at it, and you'll pay them with pigs or chickens or trees or eggs. The only artwork I've heard of being made on request was intended as a gift for me. A friend wanted to give me a bird, but he didn't think he could make one that would be good enough, so he went to a neighboring group to get one made, and he paid in chickens. They don't pay with money.

What's the relationship between what's prescribed by tradition and one's own interpretation of that? What's prescribed, and what freedom remains for the artist or maker?

The freedom lies in making a wonderfully enthralling reproduction of something *makire*, of what tradition dictates. But it's very difficult to understand precisely what that freedom is and what they consider beauty to be. When they're making a bird, they have a particular image in their head, but if you confront them with the question of why they think something's beautiful

and better than another thing, they'll say, "Can't you see? The material is good, and it's made correctly according to tradition." Their traditions have hardly changed over time. There are pictures from the nineteenth century with people in them who look, well, as if fashion didn't exist. They look exactly the same as when I was there in the late 1960s. The tattoos, the belts and jewelry, the animals they shot. Not exactly the same; there are small differences. But the traditions have been very strong for a long time; you don't change them. When something new is really useful, like aspirin, then they accept it. They're happy to have it.

But the fact that their highest praise is to call something "makire" suggests they prefer to stick with tradition. Yet they don't mass-produce, and every bird is unique.

I learned a great deal from my grandfather, who was also an anthropologist and did research on the Marquesas Islands. On the way back to Europe, he stopped off to see the Pueblo people in America, and they made wonderful pots. He remembered he needed to bring some gifts home, and he said to a potter who was making really beautiful pots, "I'd like one of those. How much is it?" "Five pesos," he said. My grandfather said, "OK, I'll take ten. How much will that be?" The man said, "Let me think about it." Then he said, "hundred pesos." My grandfather said, "That's not fair. If a pot costs five pesos, surely you can give me a discount on ten pots?" The man said, "Yes, but if I have to make exactly the same pot ten times, it'll be so boring that I'll have to charge extra." Isn't that great?

I'd like to ask you a bit more about the purpose of beauty for the Sakuddei. If I understand correctly, the human soul has a natural inclination to drift away, so we have to bind it to our bodies in various ways, or keep bringing it back or drawing it in, and the chief means of doing that is beauty?

In principle, it's normal for the soul to drift around, because the soul is curious. But if it goes too far, it can end up in regions where there are evil spirits, like *pittos*, spirits that arise out of corpses. Then the soul panics and flees to the ancestors to find safety and ensconce itself with them. And then

there's a danger that it'll never find its way back. So the body needs to stay inviting for the soul so it won't drift too far away. You can also do negative things that are bad for your soul. You can be unattractive because you're living badly, but also, if you handle things wrong or treat others rudely, the soul will get scared and leave.

Why does the soul only want to return to the body or the tribe if it can find beauty there? Why does the soul love beauty?

This is exactly the ideology that I find so attractive in the Sakuddei. The things the soul likes are precisely the things that truly are beautiful. It's attracted to good food, parties, fun, not arguing, not hurrying. All the kinds of things we find enjoyable, the soul also finds pleasing. You have to do things the soul likes now and then or it'll stray. Mind you, you *have* to do them, even though they can be tiring. For example, someone might have to organize a party. That takes days of preparation. As much fun as it is, he might not do it otherwise, since it's so tiring. But he's obligated to throw that party, or else his soul will run away.

What exactly is this soul? How do the Sakuddei envision it?

They say it's the spitting image of yourself, but much smaller, like a very small child. The shamans can see them, and during rituals they can collect them in a dish by luring them with special food. Once they've got all these little children together, they pass them from one person to another. They go around through the tribe and say to the souls, "Go to the person you belong with."

How does the soul come into being? Do your parents give it to you?

No, it arises in the body, at the same time as the body. Children definitely have souls. Even a fetus does. At the moment of conception, there's something there, and everything that exists has a soul.

Do they make figures of these souls?

No. They make them of people, but not of souls.

Can you tell by looking at someone whether or not their soul is with them?

No, but you can know that about yourself. They have examples of this. For instance, you might fall asleep and have bad dreams. When you wake up, you know your soul has experienced something unpleasant and fled. So you tell the shaman, not directly but in a kind of symbolic language, and he performs the necessary ritual to bring your soul back and put it at ease.

The soul is obviously what makes each person individual. The tribe lives in a communal house, so they're always together, and their rituals are always communal, but designed to keep the individual souls with their respective bodies.

Their ideology is that the group is more important than the individual. In the communal longhouses, the big umas that house forty people, they even split up families; the men are on one side near the entrance, and the women and children are at the other end, screened off from them and protected by them. That means the group functions as a whole and not as a collection of separate families. They do build small houses around the umas, where the families can have some privacy.

An adult man can perform certain small rituals in his own house. But the big rituals are for the collective. First the souls are assembled, and then they're transferred to their owners. This can only be done via the group. So one of the purposes of the big rituals is to unite the individuals within the larger entity of the group. The rituals in the small houses are personal. In them, too, you summon your own soul.

To explain this relationship between the individual and the group in more detail, does it perhaps lie partly in those magnificent tattoos of theirs? Does everyone have his or her own?

No, they're group tattoos that are in fact common within a particular region. Tattoos in one region differ in certain ways from those of another region.

Within your region, it's very clear which tattoos you're supposed to have. But you can also add small bodily decorations if you want to. On your thigh, for instance. Or someone might want to get a helper animal, like a monkey, tattooed on his chest in a ritual situation, to show that he's a great hunter. Or he could get a turtle.

If two umas get into an argument and challenge each other in a *pakò*, a ritual battle, and there's a tribe member who shoots a lot of animals, he might have his catch tattooed alongside the decorations everybody else has. If one group quarrels with another group, they don't fight right away; they kind of check each other out first. Who's stronger? Who can do special things, like hunt monkeys? It's hard work – enormous efforts are made. And then they use slit drums to pass on the news of how it went, making fools of the other group at the same time.

You can describe the life of the Sakuddei, within and between groups, as a relationship between harmony and rivalry. On the one hand, you have to try to live in harmony with the group; on the other hand, you want to do something exceptional; you actually want to be more than the group, to compete. This is also why groups sometimes split up. There's suddenly too much conflict because someone values his own interests most; say, he wants more pigs than everybody else and refuses to contribute pigs for the pig feasts. The group says, "That's not fair," and sometimes there's a conflict and the person leaves. Because pigs are a measure of your status and your value within the group.

> *You said a moment ago that everything that exists has a soul. So not only do you have to look out for your own soul's welfare, you also have to be careful about how you treat the things around you. From your travel report, I understand that, above all, a person shouldn't be too curious, or else they'll have trouble with "bajou." This is a force that's somewhat mysterious to me. How would you define "bajou"?*

Bajou is everywhere. Everything that has a soul also has *bajou*. It's a kind of aura. It's not individual; it's more like electricity, and it can be activated by certain forces. If you get too surprised by something, that releases its *bajou*. And if you're affected by too much *bajou*, you get sick. Stray souls come in

contact with *bajou*. For you to get well, the *bajou* has to be removed, and then the soul comes back stronger.

> *This healing is done by the "kerei," the medicine man. Is he a kind of leader for the group?*

No, *kerei* just do healing rituals. There aren't really any leaders. There's a kind of master of ceremonies, the *rimata*, who's an elder. His position isn't hereditary but is usually passed within certain families from father to son, or to someone else in the family. They're all related. It's exhaustively discussed – who should be made *rimata*? – until it's been talked out.

The *rimata* is responsible for making sure rituals go well. And it's not easy, because he has to observe an awful lot of taboos during a ritual. Before everyone eats together during a ritual, he has to fast. And he has to be present for everything, and there are all kinds of taboos he has to observe in everyday life. It's not easy, but it confers great status. There are a huge number of rituals on a great many days of the year. And the rest of the year, he has to abide strictly by the rules and not eat things that are taboo and so on. Sometimes he might secretly eat something he's not supposed to that's completely taboo for him – but nobody'd better see!

> *Do rituals ever go wrong? For instance, a soul doesn't return to its body?*

Oh, yes. In my book, I describe an example of a man who had TB and couldn't be cured by the *kerei*. So a pig was slaughtered. Pigs are more than just measures of wealth and prestige, and they're more than just sacrificial offerings: they can tell you what's going to happen. They're oracles. They can do that because they and their souls are brought in to drive away evil spirits, evil intentions. They make a lot of noise, too.

I remember that I saw the sick man lying there, and then the pig was slaughtered. They showed me the heart and said, "Look, a white streak." That meant the man was doomed to die. And they told me, "Don't give him any of your medicine or people will be saying it's your fault." And then he died.

And a death like that is a stain on the "kerei's" reputation?

It's true that a *kerei* can have a tremendous reputation, if it's been observed that people have often been healed after he's performed a ritual. But not that many *kerei* achieve that. Everyone sees what the *kerei* does; you know exactly what he's up to, you know what needs to be done, and because of that openness, you can't blame him when something goes wrong. So a death doesn't necessarily harm his reputation.

There are also huge external threats in the forest, such as the woodland spirits you mention in the book. I had quite a bit of trouble understanding the purpose of monkey hunting. Woodland spirits are the souls of monkeys that wander through the woods? How should I picture that? Do they live on a different plane of reality?

I wrote an article about that, and I called it "De wereld aan gene zijde" (The world beyond). Human beings live in their own universe, and on the other side there's a natural world, and it's a kind of carbon copy of ours. There's an ancient Indonesian folk tale about discovering an island. They arrive there, and they sit on the ground. The idea is that wherever you go, you come in as a guest, and you encounter an ancestral population, a spiritual one, a spirit world. You have to make a pact with them so you can establish your domain as your own. To that end, you have to bring them offerings and not harm their domain. And on their side, they can't simply force their way into your universe. There are woodland spirits living in the world beyond, and also the ancestors. It's also the world of the hereafter. On our side we have villages, and over there somewhere in the primeval forest live the ancestors.

But when the Sakuddei build a house, they hack and chop the heck out of that primeval forest, and the world beyond. And the possible rage of the spirits and ancestors is absorbed by means of offerings?

People say to the spirits, "Don't be angry; I need a house, you can understand that. Here, have some offerings." An offering is intended as an explanation for your behavior and a reciprocation. But if you then ask them, "What good is this offering to the spirits, anyway? What do they get out of it?" – because

I've seen the same things offered up several times – they'll say, "We don't know. It's just …" And they'll put a hand over their eyes. You can deceive the spirits. You can dupe them – that's what the *kerei* does when he cures somebody. Or think of hunting: you don't announce out loud that you're going hunting, because otherwise the evil spirits in the forest will make sure you don't get anything. Instead, it's better to use a kind of veiled language that the spirits don't understand, and in that way, you dupe them. Woodland spirits are monsters, a type of troll. Gibbons, who are thought to have special magic powers, are the most powerful of these spirits. If a gibbon's cry is heard in the mountains at night, parents will say to their children, "Never go to where the gibbons are." There are also demons, and very bad ones, too. The *pittos* I mentioned earlier are an example. There are lots of stories about these spirits. They're specific demons with individual names. They try to cause you harm whenever they get the chance.

So when it comes to ancestors and spirits, again, the point for the Sakuddei is to find a balance between the obligations of communal life and the temptations of the outside world?

You have positive and negative companions in the forest – ancestors, who are basically good and not a threat, and woodland spirits, who you can't count on but who are also basically good as long as you handle them right. And then you have the really evil spirits.

Your own ancestors are basically an entity that you trust, although they too constitute a threat because of the *bajou*, the electrical force. You shouldn't get too close to the ancestors unawares. If you move in with them, you'll die. That's the danger of the ancestors.

How should we imagine this other world of the ancestors?

The ancestors live in their own community, just like we do. Everything is pretty there – really beautiful. People describe it as a place where everything is every color of the rainbow; everything is shining and radiant. It's not that clear exactly how the ancestors live, but there are fantastic stories of people who went to see them, who had their eyes opened and gained an understanding of that other world and talked about it after they returned. That's

how people know what it's like. And the temptation to want to go there is great.

In your book, you tell a fascinating story about a boy who goes away for five days, and when he reappears, his only explanation is that he was with the ancestors.

Yes, he said the ancestors sent him back. I never found out what really happened. I had a student, a Sakuddei who'd studied in Indonesia and then come to study with me in Leiden, and later went on to get a PhD, and I asked him, "What do you think? Was he really with his ancestors?" "Of course," he said. "That often happens. He was gone, wasn't he?" He believed it, even though he was living here in the West and went on to get a PhD. It was entirely normal for him. The world of the Sakuddei and our world are parallel, as it were, and it didn't bother him that very different things happen in their world than in ours.

What did you find so attractive about the Sakuddei that you wanted to spend two years living with them in the wilderness?

Just what I said: that idea of wanting and needing to live in beauty. Making beautiful things isn't an optional pleasure for them; it's truly their passion. It's part of their faith. Beauty is their starting point, and a necessity. You want to strive for beauty, and you must, because you're responsible for something that's been given to you and for which you bear responsibility: your soul.

If we consider art a gift, as Lewis Hyde proposes in his contribution to this book, and if we put that art in a museum, then who exactly is the recipient? In his provocative essay for this volume, Frank Vande Veire (b. 1958) provides an answer that is both illuminating and not for the fainthearted. Frank Vande Veire is a Belgian philosopher of art who teaches at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent. He has published numerous books of essays in Dutch, including the notorious pamphlet "I Love Art, You Love Art, We All Love Art" (2002), which opposes the tendency of governmental agencies and artists alike to promote art for its societal relevance. Vande Veire recently published a philosophical/pornographic novel, "Bloeiende Agatha" (Blossoming Agatha, 2013).

a gift to the living dead
on the work of art as a public secret

Frank Vande Veire

Art is communication. These days, this phrase, which has been hurled at our heads for so long, amounts to a form of systematic blackmail. Art exists for the purpose of communicating: that is, to touch, move, please or provoke, delight or annoy its audience. It has long seemed evident that art's entry into public space can't but (serves only to) benefit its communicative dimension. Since the 1980s, we have witnessed the mass rise of open-air and site-specific exhibitions and of exhibitions held in private homes and public buildings not usually used as art venues. Their initiators are almost never artists but rather curators, who always deploy the same discourse: art must be freed from its sterile isolation, given room to breathe, and it can do so only outside the museum, for museums are sterile, lifeless places, bastions of elitism that hinder communication. Museums snatch art from its context, separate it from the beating heart of the community and from life itself, from which it springs. Museums coddle works of art, yes, but they coddle them to death, render them harmless. Art arises between human beings, and it must be given back to the people.

It is appalling that today people are still swallowing this anti-museum rhetoric, which receives steady support from the mass media and art critics. The fact that this discourse is being sent out into the world by museums themselves should arouse suspicion. And it is especially distressing that artists, rather than expressing their indignation en masse, are silently allowing themselves to be buried beneath it.

What is wrong with the proposition that art has become overly removed from the community, and ultimately from life itself, and must reconnect with them? *Is* there anything wrong with it? This discourse may be as old as

the modern idea of the autonomous work of art, to which it is a reaction. After all, any call for a more public art that is more willing to communicate is implicitly attacking art's "autonomy." And the idea of art as autonomous is generally regarded as outmoded, a remnant of a purist modernism whose day is past.

Where does this scorned concept of autonomy come from? Its genealogy is complex. In any case, Immanuel Kant, without using the word, clearly outlined a first possible definition in the late eighteenth century. In a nutshell, it centers on the concept of *Interesselosigkeit,* "disinterestedness." For Kant, the work of art is disinterested in the sense that it is a representation with no apparent objective; it serves no practical, moral or intellectual purpose. It does not even seek to engage our senses. The point is that the person being engaged enjoys *giving form* to the stimuli. The significance art can have for human beings in various domains (arenas) remains radically vague, and that is what makes art art.

Of course, the museum as an institution is intimately bound up with the modern concept of art. It would appear to be the place where art's autonomy, its "disinterestedness," is best safeguarded. Only images and representations whose "interest," its significance, has been effaced, as it were, end up in the museum. This is what people mean when they assert in critical/melancholy tones that museums wrench works of art from their original contexts or environments and place them into a sterile, lifeless space. In the museum, divorced from whatever vital importance it once had, or might have had, a work is nothing more than a representation to be gaped at, that is, to be experienced in a purely contemplative manner and perhaps studied within the context of art history.

Some claim that the idea of "disinterestedness" was meant as a tool for rendering art harmless, in a manner somewhat subtler than Plato's.[1] But is it not first and foremost about liberation? Does art's "disinterestedness" not liberate it from serving anything outside itself? Imagine a world in which art would have (had) to prove its moral, cognitive or practical significance, a world in which art would be continually be accused (people continually accused art) of having nothing to teach us, of failing to make us better people, help us further in life or even afford us sufficient enjoyment.

The contemporary critique of the idea of art's autonomy is shallow because it cannot be sustained. The same artist, critic or curator who dismisses

it as outmoded will be outraged the moment he is called upon to make a reasonable case for a particular work's moral content, cognitive scope or practical use. In short, however much we might expect art to "communicate," its modern, autonomous condition consists in the fact that the question of what it communicates has become inappropriate. Nevertheless, this question has taken on hysterical forms. From various quarters, art is blackmailed by this question: If it doesn't make us wiser or better and doesn't warm us or even leave us cold, then what does it have left to offer?[2]

the inevitability of the museum

The critique of art's autonomy and the accompanying plea for it to become more public and participatory calls upon an honorable tradition: that of the avant-garde. A link with the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s seems obvious. But while many of those artists did indeed abandon the cramped confines of the museum and set off into public space, all similarity ends there. If anything was alien to that avant-garde, it was the need to integrate art into life as it was lived. The avant-garde appealed to its audience's desire for a *different* life. But because any representation of this different life threatened to be merely an extension of the existing "alienated" one, manifestations of a different life needed to have an unrecognizable or even shocking quality, so that it always ended up seeming as if it was art, not life itself, that was alienated.

Contemporary calls for art to be linked to life also often appear supported by the early-twentieth-century avant-garde. In line with Peter Bürger's *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974), this historic avant-garde is considered as an attack on the work of art's autonomy. What the avant-garde demanded of art was that it get back to intervening in life in a concrete way. Dada was the most extreme example: the Dadaists believed art should be the most direct, unsublimated manifestation of life. Reread the Dadaist manifestos carefully and you constantly encounter a vulgar Nietzschean vitalism that was already abundantly evident in the Futurist manifestos. Dada appears to recognize only one "value": the unstoppable power of spontaneous, chaotically bubbling life. The museum counts as an example of the sterile, ossified bourgeois culture that suffocates life. It neutralizes the lively,

unexpected, startling or delightful occurrence that art essentially is. The museum amasses works of art, and catalogs, studies and exhibits them, but its presentations lack genuine presence. What is presented there does not register in people's lives.

The Dadaist desire to affect the audience in a more intense way than was possible in a museum did not simply consist of wanting to restore social or political interest? (significance) to art in opposition to Kant's "disinterestedness." On the contrary, Dada opposed all interest (significance). For Kant, a work of art is autonomous because it rejects intellectual concepts and moral categories, but this does not mean it opposes every form of understanding or morality. In fact, an artwork allows us to take pleasure in our ability to understand. In addition, the ability to disinterestedly enjoy a representation is related to our receptivity to the moral code that says we must disinterestedly perform our duty. In short, for Kant, the beautiful is incomprehensible, but this does not mean it seeks to frustrate our desire to understand; equally, it is amoral but certainly not immoral. Kant has nothing against pleasant artistic stimuli, as long as they are part of the pure play of form. Dada, by contrast, provokes and degrades the ability to understand, flirts with immorality, and seeks to provoke loathing. The "interest"? ("significance") art is supposed to have appears only in a negative sense. The life for which Dada throws itself into the breach mocks all interest (significance). Against the great farce, the "jubilant, Orphic nonsense" (Tristan Tzara) that life is, everything that has henceforth been considered significant – everything true, good, beautiful and pleasant – must evaporate into nothing.

If the avant-garde seeks to effect a connection between art and life, we know that for Dada this connection begins with (and, typically, goes no further than) a *violent attack*. What the citizens call "life" is for the Dadaists a pitiful sham. For them, life does not actually exist yet, or no longer does. Rather, it must be brought to life through something resembling "art," using the rough remedies of provocation, ridicule, traumatization.[3] This renewed life is one that, as Tristan Tzara writes, will have liberated itself from "all those grand words like ethics, culture, inner life." Whoever has looked at real life in all its chaos, who dares to enter into the "most primitive relationship with the surrounding reality", understands that knowledge, morals and sentiment are of no importance. In his manifestos, Tzara ceaselessly

emphasizes Dada's loathing of do-gooders and of any positive, constructive relationship with its audience. Dada refuses to get involved in any social project, and in this sense, strictly speaking, it is not an avant-garde movement at all.

In short, anyone who evokes the Dadaists today in defense of art's "social relevance" is disregarding their cynical, dandyish contempt for sociopolitical matters. Like the Futurists, the Dadaists are less allied with Marx and Proudhon than they are with Baudelaire, who called the revolution of 1848 "charming only because it was so utterly ridiculous."

Thus, contemporary pleas for a rapprochement between art and social life are not rooted in the avant-garde they call upon. No other art has ever met with such public aversion as Dada, or with such public indifference as the 1970s avant-garde. Never was art so impossible to integrate and in that sense predestined to find its place only in the museum. When the avant-garde ended up in the museum, it was not simply a case of the recuperation of a subversive movement. We should acknowledge that the avant-garde socially sidelined *itself*. Avant-garde art ushered in a new era for a new humanity, but at the same time, it was an impotent a priori indictment of every social practice that might attempt to flesh out its revolutionary gesture with a sociopolitical agenda. In that sense, this "anti-art" was still inevitably about *art*, namely about a promise that seemed to be self-sufficient – about the eternal "youth of that which begins and keeps beginning" (Maurice Blanchot). And the question is whether such a thing can find a place anywhere other than in the museum.

The experience of the avant-garde is the inevitability of museumification. Anyone who fails to take this fact into consideration is not being honest. Today, people affect to forsake the "elitist" context of art and museums while all the time they are simply expanding the museum's terrain. This is the well-known effect of outdoor exhibition routes: they contribute to the museumification of historical inner cities that is happening apace. So-called non-museum exhibitions are possible only because it is quietly assumed (of the quiet continuation of the assumption) that the viewer's gaze, his or her relationship to art, is always already completely museumified. The public is trusted not to touch, spit on or vandalize the works, not to add to them, not to take them home. Trust is placed in the disinterested, contemplative gaze

that, as Kant says, desires nothing other than to "repose (linger) at the representation of the object."

If the avant-garde cannot get rid of the museum, neither, to be sure, can the museum itself. In every action whereby it tries to do so, it succeeds only in proving its own power and omnipresence. During the 1998 Manifesta exhibition in Rotterdam, the Russian artist Oleg Kulik crawled through the city on all fours like a dog, nearly naked, with a chain around his neck. He barked at passersby, bit their shoes – it was all very daring and "anti-establishment." But creeping about in his perverse canine way, the artist was already a museum piece. His performance was tolerated, even found amusing, only because it took place within the framework of an official exhibition and thus within the context of the "museum without walls." The public's gaze was determined entirely by this context. People immediately recognized the dog man as a curious object to be looked at rather than as a threat. They viewed him not as clinically perverse but as someone who was performing perverse behavior, having arranged it with an official art institute. Everyone instantly understood that this was art – that is, something that couldn't possibly signify any real danger or disruption to their lives.[4]

the decontextualized human

The unfounded references to the avant-garde conceal a nostalgic fantasy that comes into play whenever one speaks of a marriage between art and life. It is a fantasy about what came before museum art: about an art that supposedly was genuinely part of life and enabled authentic communication; art as an event in which community reached its apotheosis. This art predating the autonomy of art and the bourgeois concept of it is still thought of and dreamt of in extremely vitalistic terms: those of ritual and celebration, party and dance, communion, eroticism and so on. The religious cult is paradigmatic of the days before art became museumified and autonomous. The cult in which the community celebrates itself as a community is the exact opposite of socially isolated museum art. It is always on the basis of such a religious fantasy that art is asked to recover its true and original context.[5]

Of course, no one believes this can be done so easily, yet the dream is cultivated and used to seduce the public. The public is seduced with the ro-

mantic dream of a world in which art still mattered enormously, akin to ancient Greece as Hegel, Schiller and the Romantics envisioned it: a world in which art counted as the most vital and high-minded expression of human consciousness.

This dream of an art that would resume its place in the midst of life dovetails with a process taking place within art itself. Countless works of art, whether they are "conceptual" or make an extreme appeal to the senses, do little more than celebrate a nostalgic idea of art. Art has long seemed inflamed by a manic desire for itself. Perhaps this is its "postmodern condition." While a certain kind of modernist purism sought to *realize* art, the essentialist desire for ultimate realization now seems more like a symptom of *exhaustion*.[6] Art's desire to regain the vital importance it once had is so "manic" because what is taking place is in fact a grieving process. The more enthusiastically the media, curators and critics go on about art's social relevance, the more stubbornly they deny to themselves and their audience that what is going on is a protracted display of mourning.

A romantic-religious fantasy is always at work when museums are blamed for estranging art from its concrete context and from social life, thus literally *abstracting* (dragging away) artworks from the world. But perhaps this rhetoric on the vacant abstraction of museum space masks the fact that social life itself has long been subject to a process of abstraction. Anyone who seeks to integrate art into "life," who wants it to resume its place amid the people, is refusing to recognize that the world contemporary human beings inhabit is not "living" at all but presents itself as a ghostly constellation of decontextualized, abstracted elements. The so-called lifelessness and decontextualization people complain about in connection with museums have in fact long been everyday realities. Modern human life is marked to the core by abstraction. Television, telephones, video, film, the Internet – the entire culture of visual and information media does nothing but wrench experiences and events from their "original" contexts and place them within a technological network, an abstract space in which everything is available to everyone all the time. Real life in which real people undergo real events has in itself long been a chimera.[7]

Understood in this way, the official art world's attempts to bring art closer to the people are highly dubious. The placement of art in public parks, squares and streets is intended to demonstrate its vitality and social relevance

at all costs. A greater intimacy between art and the public is proposed within a broad framework of a politics of cultural participation. There is a wish to weave art into the context of social life, as if that context is not itself subject to decontextualization. In general, we are far from residing in a "living reality" from which museum art is estranged; instead, we are collectively hooked up to a circuit of contextless, free-floating representations that are endlessly reproduced, varied, combined and transmitted. Understood in this way, the contrast between the realness of life and the sterile deadness of the museum has lost all relevance, if it ever had any in the first place. It is, then, advisable to keep in mind Adorno's lament: "Das Leben lebt nicht" ("Life is not alive").

Maybe the museum's critical function is precisely to allow us to discover that real life is not raging outside it: rather, above all, what is organized there, day after day, is a *lack of life*. The museum's purpose could be to allow us to see how any object, image or word that is familiar or dear to us can suddenly reveal itself as distant and indifferent. Perhaps it is only in the museum, which we are continually told is removed from the world, that we understand that we have no world: we live in a boundless "graveyard of signs" (Roland Barthes) from which escape is impossible. In this sense, the museum can be understood as a place that reveals the spectral strangeness of everything familiar. It is a place that allows a person to realize that everything he is attached to, everything that guides him cognitively, morally or emotionally and thus symbolizes his belonging to a particular context, can break free from him at any time and subsequently reveal itself as strange and inaccessible. To put it another way, the characteristic modern human experience is that everything that is familiar to us and underpins our lives *can end up in the museum at any time* and is actually always already on its way there, since the familiar can just as easily be the strange. In this sense, the museum is the ultimate embodiment of the parasitic theft that ensures modern humans remain unintegrated within the context they live in.

grave goods

The strange thing is that religion, which is often invoked as the antithesis of the modern tendency toward abstraction and decontextualization, is the most universal model of a decontextualization that is always already at work.

Every community – reportedly since the late Paleolithic – has isolated certain objects from everyday life and stored them in a location designated as "sacred." "Sacred" literally means "set apart." A sacred object incarnates life's energy and inviolable value. It stands for *life itself,* but strangely enough – and this strangeness appears to be as old as humanity – "life itself" is sanctified as an inviolable something that exists outside everyday life, standing distinct from or above it, alien and curious and sometimes threatening and deadly. "Life itself" appears as something that is *other* and can even be opposed to life – as an image, a doll, a fetish, a totem, an icon, a mask, an object.[8]

An object becomes sacred when it is removed from the circuit of social intercourse. A sacred object is therefore not public: on the contrary, it is taboo. It may not be touched or looked at, except at best by privileged people at special times. Though it embodies the inviolable singularity of the group, it is inaccessible and even dangerous to it. It is withheld not only from other groups but also from the in-group. The sacred is life itself conceived as something people cannot reach, as something that is not automatically theirs.

When people call for art to become more communicative or to better integrate itself into social life, they often refer to ancient cultures in which art stood naturally at the center of the community and played an integrative role, bringing people together via collective symbols and rituals. But a sacred object is not straightforwardly communicative or integrated into life but rather mysterious and exclusive. The phenomenon of consecration shows that a community is by definition not integrated, that that which brings people together, that which they have in common, by definition eludes them and thus above all refuses to be integrated.

Ancient peoples such as the Chinese, the Scythians and the Egyptians practiced the universal custom of removing objects from daily life and economic circulation in a highly specific form: that of grave goods. These societies hid their most beautiful and refined creations in forbidden rooms unpenetrated by daylight. These objects were reserved exclusively for the enjoyment of ancestors or gods. They were perhaps the most *site-specific* artworks ever, sealed in place.[9]

Of course, grave goods had a function within a religious economy, in a symbolic exchange relationship between humans and gods. People more or less knew what the superhuman powers wanted, and they expected something in return. But viewed in a purely economic way, the custom was a

massive loss-making activity, an extreme form of the potlatch. And can an exchange relationship with gods ever be symmetrical or equivalent? Giving and taking may appear equally balanced, but ultimately the basic principle is *asymmetrical*: first and foremost, the people receive everything from the gods. The world and everything in it, all of life, falls to them for free, and it is impossible for them to reciprocate this gift with anything that is in any way equivalent. In this sense, human beings' debt to the god or gods cannot be repaid. The "value" of the life given them is immeasurable and can therefore be embodied only in objects that are not exchangeable: that is, not exchanged with other groups. They are items that the group "keeps to itself." It hides them not only from other groups but also from itself. Even for the group that possesses them, sacred objects are hidden or secret, invisible, untouchable, taboo.[10] Grave goods are an extreme example: an aristocratic class hid its most precious objects not only from its people but also *from itself,* reserving them exclusively for the gods for eternity. And this was evidently the ultimate form of "communication."

Hiding objects away and *consecrating* them rather than exchanging or selling them does not automatically withdraw them from the circuit of gift and countergift. Rather, we are speaking here about an *excessive* form of the gift, one that lies outside the sphere of equivalent exchange with identifiable individuals or groups and even with ghosts or ancestors whose demands one is familiar with or to whom one owes a measurable debt. Such an excessive gift is an attempt to deal with the immeasurable debt one owes to an unknown other, namely the god who is the source of the excessive gift of the world and life.

For a religious person, life is not an objective fact but something *given*. One can never possess the life one is given the way one can possess other things; one can only *continue to receive* it, by constantly giving it away. Every "primitive" society tries to economize this fundamental situation through a system of gifts and countergifts, but ultimately the exchange plays out against the background of the original, excessive gift-of-the-world, whose value is immeasurable and incomparable. This gift is *unreceivable*: the life one receives remains the property of the Other. The only possible response is one of excess, as with grave goods: giving a gift of a vast number of valuable objects without ever being able to know whether it pleases the recipient beings in any way.

A human being who locks away the best he has to offer for an unknown Other shows that he does not, so to speak, have what he has. He appears to confirm that the most precious thing he has, namely life itself, is and must remain an inaccessible secret for him. He feels he can continue to "have" life only if he puts away as something untouchable the precious object representing it for an Other he does not know. He displays it in a sealed room for an ideal, imagined viewer-receiver: the one who has given the gift of the world.

Perhaps the extravagant phenomenon of grave goods can shed light on the strange form of communication that the work of art still is today. Artists appear to be kin to those archaic peoples who took their finest objects definitively out of circulation to give them to non-human or dead beings. Art is about something a human being, amid all the communicative traffic, does not know what to do with, something he cannot and does not wish to communicate, something he *keeps secret*, and keeps secret because it *is also secret from him*. This secret is all about the artist's receptivity to the gift of the world, a receptivity that is accompanied by confusion, bewilderment, astonishment, and about that aspect of the gift that, even after he has received it, remains *utterly strange* to him.

Like the giver of grave goods, the artist does not simply keep his secret hidden from others. It is also secret from him. And that is why he must *give it away:* this is the only way he can deal with it, can "have" it for himself. For the artist, the work of art is a device that prevents him from simply having to reveal a secret he does not know what to do with: he entrusts it. To whom? Not to the gods, of course. For the contemporary artist, the gift of the world does not issue from a divine authority before whom he can be grateful and awestruck and with whom he can attempt to settle his debt. This makes the gift even stranger and more unmanageable for him, and responding to it becomes more of a leap in the dark than ever.

an unmanageable surplus

Uneasiness about the sterility of museum art has, at least since the 1990s, coincided with a discontentment over the abstractness of the audience to which art addresses itself. It is a faceless audience with no specific (cultural,

ethnic, sexual, religious) identity, made up of global citizens who do not exist in reality. But what is the alternative to this abstract universalism? People want an artist to know for certain which audience he is addressing, to have a more or less definite idea of his "target group." It has evidently become intolerable to make something without being sure who it is for.

This is nevertheless a true achievement of modern art: artists no longer know who they are addressing, and this is because no one ever asks them for anything. There is no clergy asking artists to produce images that modestly uphold the word of God. There is no nobility or semi-noble bourgeoisie demanding worldly depictions reflecting God's beauty and goodness, as there was in the Renaissance. Nor is there a civil academy calling for art that represents human beings in all their dignity. Of course, there is an "art world" in which artists can seek recognition. The artist knows all too well what this world, which champions his freedom, expects of him; after all, he is a part of it. This is why his art always connects in some way to an existing, generally recognizable visual language. Yet any sign of recognition or understanding he receives from the art world can only confirm his profound uncertainty about what is ultimately desired of him. For the artist, every concrete, approachable, identifiable audience, even the God the artist may or may not believe in, serves only as a screen for an indeterminate, faceless Other whose desire remains utterly obscure. As with the ancient peoples who withdrew their most accomplished creations from their fellow humans' view and sealed them in crypts, his art is ultimately meant for someone radically unknown.

The modern era is one in which human beings have taken control and are designing and remaking the world in the service of their own needs. But it is also an age in which people constantly complain about uprooting and alienation. Along with all the objects and signs human beings produce, they immediately also produce a vast surplus that they cannot integrate. This surplus is not one of a particular category of objects or signs. Rather, the objects and signs we human beings use to give meaning to our lives can at any moment become unmanageable, strange and meaningless, and in that meaninglessness they prove to contain a message about us. What issues from us always returns to us, as a message sent from some indeterminate other place. Art deepens our fascination with this uncanny transmission, with this unintegrable, unconsumable aspect of everything we have used to make the

world ours. Art concerns itself with the way in which the world – no matter how much we study, organize, (re-)produce, (re)create or enjoy it – fundamentally remains a thing that falls to us unbidden and "inappropriately" and with which, therefore, nothing can be done. The event of the gratuitous gift of the world undermines our ability to make the world ours.

Alluding to Heidegger's ontological difference, Jean-Luc Nancy formulates it as follows: "But what has no place in the world is the advent of the world itself, its event. In a sense, the world itself is nothing but its pure act *of being* a world."[11] The appearance of the world, its becoming-present, the event with which it opens itself to us as something conceivable, is by definition inconceivable. The becoming-conceivable of the world does not fit anywhere in the entirety of representations we form of the world. This event is unmanageable: it makes a hole in the world that cannot be integrated within it. To the extent to which we are open to the event in which the world *gives* itself to us, we are bereft of any world and at the mercy of something ghostly, "unworldly." With all the representations we make of the world and use to make the world ours, we cover up this uncanny moment.

Religion amounts to a substantivization, personalization and idealization of the world-as-gift. It posits an Other from whom the gift supposedly originates. Religion hereby unburdens human beings of the unmanageable secret that the excessive gift of the world saddles them with. All "surplus" comes from the Other, and consequently to Him. In this way, religion manages to economize things: that which falls into human beings' laps, leaving them at a loss, has a demonstrable origin and thus a purpose. There is an Other who will accept human beings' countergift and who accepts it (has mercy on them). This Other is generally to be found in a particular location where, provided the ceremonial rules are observed, he is willing to receive the gift.

Modern art, for its part, does its utmost to be faithful to the unmanageability and meaninglessness of the world-as-gift. For it, there is ultimately no real Other, no god to whom the world-as-gift can be given back. The surplus with which this gift burdens the artist remains in this sense radically unmanageable; it is a surplus whose origin and purpose are both obscure. There is no Other to acknowledge the artist's countergift, to store the unmanageable secret in his chamber. In the case of grave goods, the gift was exclusively intended for those gods who dwelled in that place. Furthermore, their sealing-in was accompanied by a specific ceremony that could be car-

ried out only by privileged individuals. The sacredness of the place and the rules of the ceremony guaranteed that the gift would reach its destination, even if that destination had an obscurity about it and the gift's economic effect was uncertain. Like the ancients, contemporary artists can do nothing but offer up the unmanageable gift of the world to an obscure Other, but today there are no customary social rituals and specific places to guarantee that the gift will reach its destination. This lack of place and ritual points to the radical indeterminacy of the recipient. The receiver of the gift is no longer a specific being exalted above all others. Today, the Other is anyone. The work of art is there for "the public"; it is radically public, and the museum is the place of its unlimited publicness: a publicness that occurs in the most neutral location possible, with the ceremony reduced to an absolute minimum. Nonetheless, in spite of or thanks to this abstract publicness, an extreme form of stowing away takes place. How should we understand this?

Grave goods were tools, weapons, toilet articles, jewelry, carpets, musical instruments – things that were useful or made daily life more pleasant. The sacred sealing-in of these objects was an intervention that stripped them of their secular meaning all at once. In modern, postreligious art, by contrast, the object's secular significance is neutralized in advance, during its creation. In Kantian terms, the work of art neutralizes its own "interest," everything about the object that could have cognitive, practical, moral or decorative significance. Whereas grave goods are worldly objects that are placed in a secret location away from the world, an artwork is an object that is located at the edge of the world from the beginning. After all, it contains within it that unmanageable world-as-gift that by definition can never find a place in the world.

Through the sacred gesture of sealing away precious objects, the religious person acknowledges that the products he is proud of ultimately do not belong to him, since they originate in a divine gift. The work of art, for its part, attests being rooted (to its own origins) in a gift that is unmanageable for the artist and thus must remain secret. The artist seals into the artwork the secret that the world is for him. It therefore needs no supplementary sealing-in ritual. It is already irrevocably a secret in itself. It is a *public* secret, a secret that divulges itself openly, preferably in the bare, abstract visibility that is specific to the museum.

This is why the demand that art become more public is a strange one. Art can never be more public, more accessible to all, than it is in a museum. Integrated into public space, strictly speaking, contemporary artworks lose some of their publicness. They suffer the same fate as classical monuments, about which Musil remarked that nothing was as invisible. Those who call for artworks to recontextualize themselves actually want difficult or ritualized accessibility, mystery and quasi-invisibility, sacred thresholds. Outdoor exhibition routes respond to this wish. The transparent secret that art is – its naked unmanageability – is clearly in crisis. That is why curators lure people with special, out-of-the-way venues; it is as if they can convince the masses of art's importance only by injecting it with a sense of cultishness. (Clearly, some believe) It is as if the work of art's lack of présence for people must be compensated for with a simulated esoteric exclusivity.

no one wants art

Art's transparent secret appeals to everyone: the "public." But behind the recognizable, estimable form this audience can assume lurks an obscure Other. In the modern era, in the absence of God, this Other has become *no one*. If the world-as-gift must remain an unmanageable secret for the artist, which he can deal with only by sealing it into a work of art, then the work's intended recipient is someone who is able to deal with that secret, is capable of properly receiving the meaningless gift of the world. It is someone who is capable of receiving the gift in all its unmanageability, because he expects no meaning from the work, no orientation, no understanding, not even an emotion that makes him feel that he exists. It is someone who fully enjoys the fact that he is not at home in the world, that he is attached to that world by a single point within which everything disappears, a point within which he is indeed *no one*. If grave goods are pretty things for the dead to look at, then a contemporary work of art is a gift to the *living* dead, to beings able to *live* their death.

This Other who is "no one" is indeed something of a vacant figure. In any case, he is bereft of any symbolic or institutional authority. He asks for nothing concrete. Yet for precisely this reason, this Other is closer to the artist than any God, benefactor or commissioning party ever could be. This

Other operates at the level of a phantasm, which means he is infinitely far away as well as oppressively nearby. He demands from the artwork no particular substantive or formal qualities; he does not even demand that it resemble what people normally consider to be art. He asks only that it be "art." This demand is excessive, insatiable, for he asks not for this or that but for *everything*: the world as an unmanageable gift or radical surplus, the world as an event in the radical sense of the word, namely something that is not yet fully covered by the meaning or significance ascribed to it.

The desire for art has undoubtedly never been encouraged in such a wholesale, systematic way as it is today. This phenomenon in itself should arouse all our mistrust. The unprecedented orchestration of the desire for art, out of a conviction that it is important to human beings and society, constitutes a compulsive attempt to cover over the insatiable desire of an obscure Other who demands everything except the significance "the public" expects art to have. This public may be a culture managers' fantasy, but it has become a solid reality. The contemporary artist's relationship to this growing public is inevitably an ironic one. He cannot possibly take seriously the demand for art that supposedly emanates from that public, but on the other hand, it frees him somewhat from the coercive, insatiable Other inside him. This is why artists happily put up with garbage about art's communicative character and the fusion of art and life.

The empty, contextless museum, the place where "anything is possible," is the ideal home of the ghostly Other. From the museum's sterile, silent walls, the Other's cold gaze falls on the works. The "public" that is assumed to be hungry for art actually consists of emissaries of this eye, of the absent God that asks for art without knowing what it is asking for. The audience forms a community around a public secret that remains unspoken: not only do we not mind works of art not speaking to us, we actually consider it necessary. After all, they speak to *us* only to the degree to which they speak not to us but to a nobody who wants nothing, needs nothing, expects nothing, because he is satisfied with no less than the excessive gift of the world's *everything*. Although it scarcely occurs to us, we have long since made peace with the fact that art is meant not for us but for a being that allows itself to be affected yet can do nothing about it, a being that is, in this contact, unknowable to itself, and that, in its receptiveness to the gift of the world, loses its world, remaining attached to it only as to a ghostly unreality. All the

endless harping about art's significance makes us forget one thing: the recipient of the event of art is not capable of signing for receipt. This is the modern, "sublime" aspect of the artwork – the fact that receptivity and unreceptiveness are intertwined, that, more precisely, receptivity exists only against the background of a deep unreceptiveness to the gift that comes to us from the artwork. The "public" is an ideological construction that serves to keep this hidden. No one is a member of this public. The public always consists of *others*: those who supposedly receive the world-as-gift in an unprejudiced manner. An uncomplicated receptivity, an "openness" in the positive or negative sense, is the most notable quality ascribed to this public.

The writer Witold Gombrowicz pointed out that it is *through the other* that we believe in art. Thus, we might wonder who actually believes the rhetoric about art's communicative character, the plea that it needs to become better connected to life. Perhaps the curators resort to it merely to convince politicians to fork over cash. After all, politicians have plenty to say about art's social role: above all, it should not be too elitist; broad swathes of the population should participate in it; it should be "community-building"; and so on. Consequently, they love it when art enters public space. After all, that's where the people are. Of course, everyone knows the politicians don't really mean all this. Politicians generally do not lose sleep over art, nor is there any reason why they should. They speak on behalf of a community that has the right to participate fully in everything communal, and that includes art. When politicians express a wish that art be given "back" to the people, they are in the main thoughtlessly repeating what the art world's representatives have told them. In short, no one believes the antimuseum rhetoric – not the curators, not the politicians, not the artists – and yet it circulates, is even omnipresent. And here, perhaps, we touch on the strange way in which ideology always functions: as a discourse no one believes in and no one takes responsibility for, one that no one can be held personally accountable for but that meanwhile holds us all in thrall.

We believe in art's communicative character through the other. This other often appears in the fictitious form of the *unprejudiced viewer*, the viewer whose gaze is pure and spontaneous. This figure is always played off against an elitist, spoiled audience whose view of art is believed to be too reflexive, too influenced by prior knowledge and intellect. Like many professional art experts, the curator is weighted down by his vast knowledge

and overconsumption of art. This is why he dreams of a viewer who can still muster a naive amazement at art. This is the fiction that keeps alive the desire for art in public space: the idea that it is intended essentially for a non-art public. One imagines an unsuspecting, accidental passerby, someone who does not even realize this is "art" and has in any case never heard of anything as absurd as the "autonomy" of art. For this unprejudiced being, the work is not an object of disinterested contemplation; it breaks through the surface, as it were, and truly touches him.

In light of this idea, the story of Thierry De Cordier's sculpture *Pain Catcher* is interesting. The work is a grim, black, larger-than-life combination of a Christ figure, a plague victim, an ascetic, and a criminal in the stocks. De Cordier placed it in a village square in southern France. The local people did indeed take an unprejudiced attitude, in that they thought little of the work; more than that, they experienced it as a threat. For them, art's magical power turned out to be more than a platitudinous idea mouthed by critics and curators. The night of the opening, the villagers destroyed the sculpture and hauled it off to the dump.

This anecdote is mentioned in a great many writings about De Cordier. Those who cite it seek to show that his work is not mere art but something that "simply *is* reality" (Piet Vanrobaeys) – that it therefore is not merely viewed in disinterested contemplation but has a real impact. De Cordier's *Pain Catcher* is seen as proof that a work can truly free itself from the artistic context and thus abolish its own artistic character. In achieving this, it supposedly becomes "communicative" in the most radical sense: exposed, without protection or mediation, to people who have no concern for art, who have unprejudiced gazes and who can be filled, if necessary, with authentic rage and fear. What is never mentioned is that neither the curators, the critics nor the museumgoing public *has any experience whatsoever* of this radical, if negative, receptivity to works of art. A work's truly and radically becoming communicative (in a kind of transubstantiation) is exclusively the business of an *other,* of a primitive, premodern race with no idea whatsoever about art and its autonomy. Only through these exotic figures, from whom civilized art folk fortunately know themselves to be separated by a wide gulf, do they believe art can be "reality." Today, De Cordier's *Pain Catcher* now resides in the museum, like any other sculpture. Naturally, it never had any other destination. But in suggesting that it might have if those hotheaded

country folk had had any sense, curators and art critics (and in this case perhaps also the artist himself) seek to make us believe in the vital importance of art. The idea that De Cordier's sculpture was once *real* to a gang of savages heightens its artistic aura, its museumified sacredness and thereby also its financial value.

The one to whom a pure receptivity to art is ascribed and who must be addressed in public space thus functions as a phantasm. This figure revives the dream of what art must once have been like: not a formal game with no strings attached but the truly communicative catalyst of a genuine communality. This figure is a phantasm in a real sense because it functions as a screen behind which there lurks a figure that is much more intangible, much more uncanny: the faceless Other who is kin to the gods and ancestors for whom people displayed their most precious possessions in mortuary temples.

Art is intended for an Other who is *other* and always will be. We cannot ask him what he wants; we cannot meet him; we cannot address him at all, for instance to ask him why exactly he assigns importance to art; we can conduct no market research on what he expects of art. Of course, we can try, and we do, but any answer we get lacks significance, for the Other has no voice, does not communicate, refuses to let himself be represented. We cannot take him into account. To take him into account is to not take him into account. This Other is not a god or an animal but that insatiable Other-in-ourselves who can be satisfied with nothing less than the excessive gift that the world is. This is why we are frightened of this strange gift and prefer to receive it in a veiled form, in a form that still bears the traces of the beauty and the associated promise of happiness for which art has always stood.

notes

1. See for example: Arthur Danto, *The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and the Ends of Taste*, Amsterdam, G+B Arts International, 1998, from 69.
2. This blackmail is today mainly a moral-political one, in which all longing for autonomy is discredited through capitalization on our guilt over the terrible state of the world (as at the last three Documentas), or else it is an emotional blackmail that appeals to our "intuitive" understanding of what is important to people (the media's human-interest culture). Art is twice bullied, out of a sort of humanism.
3. This performance strongly calls to mind the 1968 performance "Aus der Mappe der Hundigkeit," in which Peter Weibel was led through the streets of Vienna on a leash, on all fours, by his wife, Valie Export, for a gallery opening.

4. For Dada, and actually for a whole swathe of artistic modernism, consciousness-raising is first and foremost a *bringing to life*. Freud seems to provide the paradigm for this idea in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with his speculation that life is generated through the traumatic influence on dead matter of something external. Life is *startled* to life.
5. Werner Hamacher has pointed out that the museum is often interpreted as "a site of abandonment by the mother." He persuasively shows that museum criticism by authors as diverse as Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Krysztof Pomian and Nathaniel Hawthorne is driven by a nostalgia for the religious cult. See "Expositions of the Mother: A Quick Stroll through Various Museums," in: *Brief Issues in Cultural Analysis, ASCA Yearbook*, Kampen, Kok Pharos, 1996.
6. Jean-Luc Nancy speaks of a nihilism that is particular to "l'art de l'Idée résiduelle," an art that "fixates on the last glow of its Idea, on its pure and somber residue." See: *Les Muses*, Paris, Galilée, 1994, 147–48.
7. See Frank Vande Veire, *And Art is What an Artist Does.* About the artist and his public in response to Camiel van Winkels *Moderne leegte*, in: *De Witte Raaf* no. 88, November–December 2000, 14.
8. See Jacques Derrida, *Foi et savoir. Les deux sources de la 'religion' aux limites de la simple raison*, in: Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, *La religion*, Paris, Seuil, 1996.
9. See Krysztof Pomian, *De oorsprong van het museum. Over het verzamelen*, Heerlen, De Voorstad, 1990, 23–24 and 32–34.
10. See Maurice Godelier *L'énigme du don*, Paris, Flammarion, 1996.
11. Translated from the French: "Mais ce qui n'a aucune place dans le monde, c'est la venue même du monde, son événement. En un sens, ce n'est rien d'autre que le monde lui-même, ou son acte pur, c'est *qu'il y ait* monde." Nancy, op. cit. (note 5), 129.

The claim that art represents non-pecuniary values is based on the assumption that art has meaning, or more precisely: meanings. These meanings come about in the relationship artists build between the work they make and the audience they address. What these meanings are – be they personal, social, political, critical, artistic – is up to the audience to decide. But it is crucial that meaning comes about if the work is to become valuable. Making meaning is making values. How does this happen? That was the question with which media theorist Arjen Mulder went to interview one of the founders of social semiotics, Gunther Kress. He didn't get a straight answer, but he got enough ideas from Kress to produce the essay in this book, which is his own interpretation of what making meaning/making value is all about. Mulder's most recent books from V2_Publishing are "Understanding Media Theory" (2004), "Dick Raaymakers: A Monograph" (with Joke Brouwer, 2008) and "From Image to Interaction" (2010). He co-edited nine of the ten books in the V2_Interdisciplinary Series, of which the current book is a part.

what we do when we make art
or: the importance of semiotics today

Arjen Mulder

How is it that we are capable of understanding each other? The answer of the cognitive sciences is: because we have sensory and neurological systems that convert impressions from the world outside into physical reactions, into *the feeling of what happens*, into an awareness of what's occurring in ourselves. We then project this awareness outwards, which makes us think that we are experiencing what is happening in the world around us. In fact, what we experience is nothing more than the operation of our nervous system, in which disruptions in sensory cells are translated into loops between brain regions, which in turn trigger muscular movements and glandular secretions.

Modern philosophy's answer to the question of the preconditions for human understanding is an analysis of the conceptual machinery we use to manage the flow of sensations within us. We fill this machinery with concepts and logic that lead to patterns, distinctions and differences we can think with and communicate about. Language is a tool for creating distance from what's happening inside us, so we need not be blind victims of our irrational urges and fears but are free to make decisions based on arguments that are open to discussion. We will never know what's happening in the world independent of our conceptual apparatus, or we will know it only by proxy, derived from whatever logically valid statements we can make about the world.

Both approaches emphasize the notion that in both body and mind we humans are closed systems that mirror each other in such a way that we believe we can more or less understand each other. The interesting thing about semiotics is that it answers the question of the possibility of mutual under-

standing by pointing to what is exchanged between our bodies when we try to understand each other, i.e., signs. Signals fly back and forth in the space between us. And although these signals are processed by our cognitive and philosophical systems, they are themselves other things. We understand what is happening around us because we recognize most of the signs in our environment and can interpret unknown signs on the basis of previous experience. A sign is anything that is recognized as such and is used to interpret specific behavior.

Semiotics doesn't regard our capacity for mutual understanding as an individual achievement but as a matter of give and take. We transfer signals to others and receive signals from them. In return for these signals, we may transfer other ones, for instance by engaging in conversation or by hitting the other person over the head. We can also pass on the signs as we understand them to others and widen our circle of communication, for instance through social media or by engaging in a dialogue with someone else based on our interpretation of what we think we have understood. So meaning is something I give and receive and give again, not something that is simply there or comes into being by itself. Meaning is the ability of a statement, gesture, body or object to enter into a relationship with something other than itself. If I reject all offers of such a relationship, then the offering will remain meaningless to me.

modes and meaning

From the moment it is born, an infant reads the expression on its mother's face while it is being breastfed. The first signals from the outside world that we recognize as signs are the vitality forms of the woman who feeds us from her body. We respond to her by sending back signals with our eyes and facial muscles. Some of these signals are answered; others are not. We respond to loving signals from Mommy, but we turn our head or avert our gaze when we receive angry ones.

We train our facial expressions to what child psychologist Daniel Stern calls affect attunement.[1] Baby smiles, Mommy happy; Mommy smiles, baby happy. If you understand the signs, you're never alone. From day one, signs are social by nature. We get our first lesson in semiotics at our mother's

breast, and this occurs in a completely preverbal and nondiscursive manner. The most fundamental meanings we learn to recognize are not discursive but are what the philosopher Susanne Langer calls presentational.[2] We can see, hear and feel them but cannot (yet) translate them into words. And they are not only in our facial expressions but also in what Daniel Stern designated as our movement contours: the way we hold our bodies and move our arms and legs, the abruptness or smoothness of these gestures.

It is only when infants have truly mastered the range of these presentational meanings, after eighteen months or so of practice, that they can begin to use spoken language and discursive meaning to make clear what they want or intend. From this moment on, for the entire rest of our lives, each conversation and each language-based exchange is founded upon a preverbal, wordless process of understanding with which we gauge how words are intended – well-meaning, angry, comforting, provocative, ironic, funny, matter-of-fact.

In the absence of these signs to guide understanding, e.g., in textual media such as books, magazines, letters, emails, etc., which have neither images nor sounds, there is nothing to guarantee the meaning of the words, and this often results in one misunderstanding after the other. Hence the frequent use of emoticons, which accompany even the simplest of messages. That nice girl you're unconcernedly chatting with online may well be some old man with less than honorable intentions. Words without a bodily carrier can mean anything. As can images, by the way, whether they are photographs, videos, web pages, games, video installations or any other screen-based media.

The face with its vitality forms is the first coherent whole outside ourselves that we find responds to us if we ourselves respond to it. The signs come from outside, and outside is also where we send our signs. This leads to agreement and conflict: in short, mutual understanding. And, after a while, it turns out that the faces and bodies of other people also respond to us: father, brothers, sisters, the maternity nurse, grandmas, aunts, neighbors, etc. Even the cat or dog responds, as do the tap in the bathtub and the mobile that hangs over our cradle when we hit it.

The signs from these vitality forms together make up the first "mode" of signifying that we recognize and use – the term was coined by Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen.[3] A mode can be described as the way in which

signs are combined into a convenient whole that prompts interpretation and signification, or what these theorists call "semiotic work." Signs here are made up of a signal that comes to us from the outside world – the signifier – and a signal that we send back to it in response – the signified. If someone greets us in the street by waving at us and we wave back, we connect the signifier of the other person's raised hand to the signified of our own gesture to make the sign for "hello" or "goodbye." Or "watch out!" The movement contours make clear the potential meaning that is brought into play by the semiotic partners.

In their books, which bear titles such as *Social Semiotics* and *Multimodal Discourse*, Kress and Van Leeuwen develop a theory about what designers in the broadest sense of the word are actually creating when they execute a greeting, write a text, draw an illustration, design a chair, build an interactive installation, design a building, edit a book, develop a website, compose a sound piece, and so on and so forth. Their proposition is that designers and artists do not really design things or relationships between things but rather the behavior of the users of their designs, i.e., the readers, viewers, listeners, or in general the recipients of their message.

When you smile at a baby, you are designing the smile you hope to get in return. When you wave at your neighbors, you are designing their potential response. Likewise, when you write a text, you are designing reading behavior. By using periods, commas and devices such as rhythm, stressing certain words and applying internal rhyme, you are guiding the inner voice the reader will begin to hear. By using paragraphs, blank lines and chapters, you frame the information you offer in a meaningful and coherent way, so that the text will become meaningful to the reader.

This all has to do with what Roland Barthes, in the early 1950s, denoted as the *écriture* of writers: their "mode of writing," as it was called in English.[4] For centuries, a more or less identical writing mode was used in French literature, jealously guarded by the Académie Française, but from the late nineteenth century, this mode was increasingly rejected by writers who wished to be *absolument moderne*. From then on, writers could choose from a range of different writing modes: literary, popular, scientific, gothic, intellectual, diplomatic, critical, etc. They could also invent and apply new modes themselves. Arthur Rimbaud, in *Illuminations*, was the first to use various writing modes sequentially and together, applying what Kress and Van

Leeuwen call a multimodal discourse. Marcel Proust, in *In Search of Lost Time*, proved himself a master of the multimodal novel: again and again, he uses new modes of writing to allow characters from all social backgrounds of the time to express themselves.

Once a text is written, be it mono- or multimodal, a graphic designer goes to work. He or she uses margins, fonts and font sizes, headings, lines and illustrations, color fields and numbers to encourage desired reading behavior, aiming to get the reader to pay attention and be educated or attempting to stimulate and amuse, as the case may be.

Likewise, a painter designs the viewing behavior of the beholder with his or her brush technique, use of color and surface division, by placing focal points according to the Golden Section and letting things fade towards the edges … Come, the painting says, and study the details of the texture up close, or take a step back to see the whole of the work, including the frame, or let your eyes explore the way the light strikes the paint from different angles. In doing so, you will see the meaning of the painting emerge, or create it yourself: the experience of the virtual space in the painted surface, or, by contrast, the ultimate flatness of the painting. Come, the interactive installation suggests, play with me, and I'll take you somewhere you've never been before.

What designers and artists intend to give their audience in constructing a certain mode is not an unequivocal meaning but an opportunity for signifying or activating the imagination in a specific, planned direction. The idea that makers are able to completely preprogram the signification of their work is an illusion. What artists or designers can do is combine signifiers in such a manner that these "semiotic resources" together create a specific "semiotic potential": an invitation to the audience to accept the signals offered and to process these into signs that, in turn, may create another semiotic potential elsewhere. Every successful sign is the start of a series of significations.

There is a fundamental difference between mode and medium. As Gunther Kress explains: "*Medium* is the term I use for the cultural technology of dissemination/distribution; the term *multimedia* is for me about a kind of category confusion, being misled by a past in which technologies of representation – that is, *modes* – were associated with a specific *medium* – modes using sound – music, speech, soundtrack – were associated with *radio*, e.g.

When new technologies came along, it was possible to combine different media in one appliance, so that the modes which were previously associated with one medium in one distinct, separate appliance/technology could now occur in the new appliance which combined radio, with video, with print, with filmic stuff. So for me 'multimedia' conflates and then confuses technology of representation and technologies of dissemination with each other."[5]

The mode, in sum, can be described as the set of rules that govern how the creator of a work applies the specific semiotic resources in such a way that they result in a specific semiotic activity and thereby in a specific behavior. These specific semiotic resources consist of all the signifiers that can connect the recipients of the work through self-found signifieds to a meaningful whole or – just the opposite – to a chaos of conflicting signs. Kress and Van Leeuwen define semiotic resources as "anything that is recognized as a semiotic resource." The idea is that the more aware you are of what semiotic resources you use and have at your disposal, the less risk you run of people finding meanings in your work that you never intended to be there but that snuck in by mistake, for instance, because you were unaware that the politician you photographed had a bump in his trousers that could bring unwanted associations to mind.

In their successive books, Kress and Van Leeuwen describe two levels of semiotic resources: individual details, such as the paragraphs, lines, dots, colors, etc., mentioned earlier, and the means of assembling those details into a meaningful whole. A few of these "meta-means" are: *framing* – the framing of certain parts of a text or image with lines, colors or other means in order to impose coherence; *provenance* – taking an image or quote out of a known context to give it a new possible meaning (for instance, publishing a newspaper photo on Facebook or including a line from a poem in an essay); *fixing* – choosing the specific mode or modes you wish to use to invoke a specific complex of meaning; *experiential meaning potential* – the tone in which you deliver a message, for instance, by talking in a crooning voice or using chiaroscuro in a painting or a coarse grain in a photograph; *production* – the material qualities of the media used to convey your message; and *distribution* – the peculiarities of the channel used to spread your message.

Such semiotic resources in a work or action are all intended to elicit a reaction in the recipients, to evoke a desire or need for semiotic work; in

other words, an urge to interpret and signify. That is the activity they wish to invoke: linking something that is recognized as a signifier to something that may serve as a signified in order to produce specific behavior. Kress and Van Leeuwen therefore equate semiotic resources to what J. J. Gibson calls affordances.[6] Affordances are the behavioral possibilities and limitations that a context or product offers to its users. For Gibson, that context is a landscape full of shortcuts and hiding places in which animals try to find their way, but it could just as well be a game with the recurring task of finding the hidden affordances in the proffered image and using them to complete an assignment. Houses with their hallways and doors, and websites with their hyperlinks, are also condensed forms of affordances. An affordance is a sign that something can happen at the signaled spot.

With Donald MacKay, we can add that affordances do not necessarily invoke a response of immediate behavior by the recipients. It can also be future behavior, or what MacKay calls "a conditional readiness for behavior."[7] Spoken words might be interpreted and translated into what Gunther Kress calls an "inner sign" for later use. MacKay gives the example of a man who walks into a bar and proclaims, "It's pouring." He hereby gives the other people in the bar the option, when they go home later, of putting on their raincoats or simply accepting the fact that they are going to get wet. The same goes for a film or a poem: it is not expected to have immediate behavioral consequences either. But if a situation occurs that is reminiscent of an artistic experience you once had, you may to your surprise find yourself in bed with a stranger, for no more reason than that she reminds you of the woman in Chantal Akerman's film *Les rendez-vous d'Anna*, or the poem "Days of 1908" by Kavafis.

Affordances are not instructions but opportunities for behavior. You can ignore them altogether or use them in ways other than intended. The recipients of a message – whether it comes from a work of art, an everyday object or another person – are free to respond as they see fit, as long as they are aware of what semiotic resources were used in relation to which affordances. Therefore, designers or artists had better incorporate the affordances in the planned mode in such a way that they trigger behavior only at the right moment, not sooner or later. This is exactly what signification does: it plans behavior for when it is needed and extends the behavioral repertoire well before the situation occurs in which that behavior is suitable.

the mode as interface

The mode may be a set of rules for invoking, say, a nostalgic atmosphere, as in a weekend-in-the-country spread in a lifestyle magazine – a matter of choosing colors, fonts, certain photographs, etc. A mode can also be a company's hip or, by contrast, conservative visual identity, or the sophisticated or cumbersome navigation of a website or network environment. A mode may be an ecstatic style of writing intended to drag readers unquestioningly along with a train of thought or scare the living daylights out of them. Increasingly, the mode is a combination of several media and modes – text, image, sound, color – all deployed as semiotic resources to guide desirable behavior.

Countless modes are used as a matter of course in, for instance, graphic design and product design, but it is also possible to construct, test and apply new ones. Contemporary artists in fact aim to create new modes with each new work of art. An example would be Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1980). Each of these photographs apparently comes from some movie, but funnily enough, one is unable to tell the story the stills supposedly refer to. Sherman does not take her images out of a linear flow but refers to known and unknown modes as used in the film industry. Every one of her untitled film stills shows a different mode of filmmaking. Doing variations on a single mode produces innovations: something new emerges from designing a mode that has not been applied before.

In the books of Kress and Van Leeuwen, the concept of the mode remains slightly elusive. After all, it would be inconsistent with their theory if they assigned it an unequivocal meaning instead of leaving its semiotic potential open. What makes it such a convenient concept is that it identifies the specific field of work of artists and designers within the greater creative process in which an immaterial idea is translated into a material medium. Kress refers to this translation using the term "transduction." For Gilbert Simondon, transduction was the transfer of a message from one medium to another, for instance, from a live voice to a telephone wire and back again to what sounded like a live voice.[8] For Kress, transduction would be the translation of a message from one mode to another, e.g., a script to a spoken play, or a script to a staged performance, with words becoming color, setting, etc.

This confronts us with the fact that there are two sides to a mode: that of its producer and that of its recipient/interpreter. However much sophistication artists and designers use in creating their modes, there is no guarantee that the recipients will experience the work in the desired manner and internalize it as immediate or postponed behavior. Opposite the author's deliberate mode of writing, we have the audience's mode of reading. What the author gives, the reader accepts in his or her own way, even though authors can guide, both through their *écriture* and through the chosen platform (book, blog, iPhone, social media). Preliminary research reveals five reading modes.[9]

Deep reading is done with texts of which one wishes to explore all layers. It involves concentration, attention, rereading, making notes in the margins. The most suited medium is the book (print or electronic). *Speed reading* is skimming a text diagonally to see if it contains information that may be important, perhaps in preparation for deep reading; the appropriate medium is print. In *light reading*, our gaze jumps from paragraph to paragraph, looking for interesting passages, as when we read a newspaper or magazine. *Scan reading* is visually scanning a text in search of relevant terms or quotes, for instance, when looking for specific information on a website. *Hyperreading* is reading passages by going from one hyperlink to the next.

By analogy, when we watch images, a distinction can be made between *deep viewing* (looking at a painting in a museum or seeing a movie in a cinema), *speed viewing* (browsing through a photo book or magazine, fast-forwarding a video or DVD), *light viewing* (professional photography is all about not letting viewers linger on a particular magazine page too long but prompting them to continue browsing), *scan viewing* (as with commercial photography in public space) and *hyperviewing* (channel-surfing).

The mode may be the interface for the transduction of meaningful content from the producer's side to meaningful content on the recipient's side, but the content is not the same at both ends of the transduction process. On the production end, the mode is an assemblage of individual but structured semiotic tools, while at the reader's/user's end, it comes across as a gestalt that pushes the signifying in a certain direction. At that point, the reader/user can start pushing back, develop a counterforce and explore the semiotic potential in his or her own very personal way, even turn it against itself.

According to Gunther Kress, the multimodal way of working is so popular in the current neoliberal stage of our society because it is an alternative in which neoliberal social signifieds find their expression in semiotic realization: principles of semiotic composition as apt signifiers of neoliberal social (non-)organization. With the use of colorful backgrounds, attractive images and fragmented bits of text – found everywhere on websites and in magazines – the recipient is encouraged not to listen or read too closely. This diminishes the power of language to create distance from what language itself does to us, and it smothers the critical abilities of the readers/users.[10]

But that is only one side of the story: at the same time, these readers develop the ability to choose a different reading mode from the intended one and can start to explore the semiotic potential of a message in their own ways. Opposite the signifiers of the writing mode are the signifieds of the reading mode: these are two different aspects of a semiotic process of production, new production through selection, and transformation of signifiers and signifieds. And the more precisely aware the recipient is of which semiotic resources are being applied to what ends, the better he or she is at tackling and diverting its effects. Understanding how Facebook and similar companies persuade users to dump all their personal data on their websites also means understanding how to prevent this and perhaps even take control of it.

the ideational function

My argument here is for a revaluation of semiotics in the discourse about art. Semiology, in its contemporary form of social semiotics, is a very useful tool for understanding what we exchange with each other when we engage in the giving-and-taking behavior known as communication.

Semiotics has a peculiar history. Its heyday was in the 1970s, when it became an increasingly popular scholarly discipline. In those days, under the guidance of leading figures such as Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan and Derrida and in line with Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic semiology of 1911, everything people produced, including consciousness, was labeled as Text.

A Text is a closed system of linguistic signs, such as words and sentences, which mean something only because they differ from each other in sound and meaning, not because they lend names to different things or situations in the outside world. The Text is about nothing but itself, about how it evokes effects of meaning and reality. And according to old-style semiotics, everything was Text – a photograph, a building, a piece of clothing, the layout of the city, science, even nature itself.

Roland Barthes was always looking for cracks and splits in the bastion of the Text. This hopeless endeavor keeps his work interesting even today, though many of his attempts to forge a connection between systems of signs and the outside world failed because of his mannered mode of writing. It was a way of thinking that was frowned upon in the Anglo-Saxon world, where it was derogatively referred to as "French fog": an inscrutable juggling of jargon that the Parisian intelligentsia seemed to have a patent on, with their followers spoiling the worldwide public debate for years with top-heavy jargon, postmodernist cleverness and politically correct mentality-guarding. By the mid-1980s, everyone was so fed up with it that semiotics was removed from the curricula, root and branch.

Although this was a relief at first, after a while it seemed as if something had been lost in the process. With the ossification and subsequent abolishment of the semiotic method, we had also lost the language with which we could argue about the meaning and value of things and expressions, such as artworks of an experimental nature or non-bestselling books. Without considering the semiotic potential it represents, the only standard for gauging the value of a work is what the "greater fool" is willing to pay for it. On the other hand, people are quick to use strong language or moan in desperation when it comes to defending all those beautiful and meaningful things that are classified as "art" or "literature." Or, if they wish to discuss the meaning of a work, the aficionados quickly revert to generalizations, such as "It's all about, like, symbols. All very spiritual," as I once heard someone sum up a body of work. Populism also benefits from a lack of training in semiotics. When so many people are no longer capable of recognizing the intended meaning of terms like "aliens," "immigrants," "economic refugees" or "bloody foreigners," something is seriously amiss in education.

Since 2000, semiotics has been used as a technical tool for commercial activities such as design analysis and customer profiling. Semiotics is the

only discipline that can explain how to extract meaning from the plethora of big data gathered through information technology. This contemporary semiotics is a technique for data filtering and pattern recognition that compares the meaning intended by the sender with the meaning as understood by the receivers. Profiling is semiotics in action, but judging by the large number of useless "custom" ads that constantly pop up on the screen when you use social media and search engines, the only conclusion is that the semiotic method is being applied here in the crudest of ways.

The goal of contemporary marketing is to shoot a set of signs at individuals in order to wake up their inner consumers and induce them to buy things. Billions are spent to make the signifiers of a brand – a name, logo, a visual identity – fuse into a super-strong sign with that one particular signified: dynamic, or elegant, or more powerful; original, virile, feminine, young, old, sophisticated, rough, natural, artistic, artificial. Follow your dreams … But even our most mundane dreams are more interesting than the way they are represented by others, if only because we do not look at our dreams but actually experience them.

Living, physically experienced meaning is not the same as mediated transfer of meaning. Today, nine or ten globally operating billion-dollar companies define the formats and modes we use to communicate with each other. Like! Search! Buy! These, too, are concepts that – after being imposed on our emotions – generate patterns, cause distinctions, posit differences. Only this time, their purpose is not to enable us to distance ourselves from what befalls us in the outer and inner world but to gain power over the experience and guide and control it. You're not wearing designer clothes? Loser!

However, Kress and Van Leeuwen's social semiotics offers some relief here. They again ask why a particular person says a particular thing, in whatever form, and why this is understood in a certain way and not in another way. Or, to put it more simply: why, in fact, do we communicate? Why are we so intent on making ourselves understood by others? Gunther Kress explains the genesis of social semiotics: "In England, at the University of East Anglia, Bob Hodge (a literary scholar) and I, teaching linguistics, wanted to develop a linguistics which would have social relevance. This became a book, *Language as Ideology* (Routledge, 1979), a mix of Marxist and Freudian theory. Then Bob went back to Australia, in 1976, to Perth and two years

later I followed, going to Adelaide. Before we parted we said we'd write something that expanded the basic tenet of *Language as Ideology* – i.e. the social produces the semiotic (Marx's base/superstructure model) into all of meaningful social activity. That became the book *Social Semiotics* (Polity 1988), written over the period 1979–1986, with occasional long visits – and before email. In Sydney (where I was by then) I began to team up with Theo van Leeuwen, and for us the question was: Are images not also the outcome of social practices and do they not show the regularities, even though very differently, given their different materiality, of language?"[11]

Let us once more review the semiotic process, or the process of producing meaning.[12] A maker or producer, an individual or a group, makes the work, a text without a capital T, as Halliday called it (a photograph, a film, a website, etc.). This text now serves to establish the relationship between the maker and a receiver – again, an individual or a group. This establishing of a relationship is the *interpersonal function* of the text. The way in which the text itself is structured is called the *textual function*. The mode is the textual function that serves to start the interpersonal function and keep it going. Via the mode, producer and recipient can interact: give; take and give back; take back and give again. This process continues as long as there is a semiotic potential to explore, new meanings emerge or new behavioral possibilities present themselves.

The question, though, is: What is this conversation about? Why do we want this interpersonal function? The cynical answer is that we don't want it at all, but it is forced upon us. We would much rather passively enjoy the textual functions as such.[13] The sociological answer is: Because we humans are social animals and wish to fight feelings of loneliness. The text is an "interaction ritual," an element in a chain of behaviors in which we learn to mimic each other.[14] Affect attunement among adults consists of talking together, smoking together, playing together, loving together, fighting together, in short: doing things together to avoid being excluded from the semiotic community.

Beside the interpersonal function, which connects producer and recipient, there is also the *ideational function*. This is how the text relates to the world beyond the sign system: the ideational function is the way a text is about something else than itself. A mode is the textual function that works, on the one hand, as an interface between producer and recipient but, on the

other, also as an interface between them and the outer world. The goal of the mode – of all communication, for that matter – is to let the interlocutors make contact with the reality outside the circle of maker, text and reader. The content of communication is what lies beyond discursive communication.

The "social" in "social semiotics" does not just refer to the social contract between the person who puts a signifier out in the world and the person who links it to a signified. It also refers to the fact that the created sign reveals something about the social reality that is given, and giving, meaning. The agency invoked by a mode is not only situated within the playing field of the text and is not only about the relationship between the text and ourselves – how we enjoy a work of art, how we interact with an artistic installation. This agency, or conditional readiness for behavior, is also, and primarily, active in our everyday world – our social system and ecosystem, our culture and nature. The sign created in the exchange through the interpersonal function of the text refers to more than just itself: that is, the outside world.

Charles Sanders Peirce, the American founder of old-style semiotics, distinguished three types of signs (in itself an amazing achievement, in view of the billions of signs found in the world).[15] The difference between these three types is based, interestingly enough, on how they relate to reality. In the first place, there are signs that look like what they are referring to. Peirce called these *icons*. Icons are signifiers that are reminiscent of something else – their signifieds – but it is impossible to know whether that something else actually exists. You can never be sure whether the drawn face or the filmed zombie actually looks like that in reality or even exists at all. The icon offers no guarantee of authenticity whatsoever.

Peirce's second type of sign is the *symbol*, which has a conventional meaning that seems to have been arrived at by general consent – for instance, the three colors of Belgium's flag, or a national anthem played at the Olympic Games. The headscarf is a symbol of piety or folklore; a red cross indicates medical aid. A symbol is a prescribed, fixed relationship between a signifier and a signified. It is not a bad thing to burn a piece of cloth, but if you burn a flag, it is a gross insult to a nation. Every cliché and every stereotype is a symbol: you don't need to think about it; you know what it represents. Because of their conventionality, authenticity plays no role in symbols: there

is no direct link between symbol and reality, nor do we discern any resemblance between them. After all, if the sign really looked like the thing it represents, we wouldn't need a convention to give it meaning.

The most interesting of the Peircean signs is the third type, the *index*. The index is a sign that originates directly from the thing it refers to, but without resembling it. If you see black smoke rising, you know that underneath you will find blue or orange flames. A bending treetop or turning weathervane indicates the direction in which the invisible wind is blowing. A small analog black-and-white photograph shows almost nothing of the street it depicts during the one-hundredth or one-thousandth of a second in which it was taken, but it does originate from that specific situation. Indexes do not resemble the things they represent, but the analog photo, the smoke from the fire and all the other indexes on earth are guaranteed authentic, non-falsified proof that something is really happening or has really happened – and is now taking place within you if you accept the working of the sign.

The mode that an artist or designer develops for a unique work or prototype or genre can be constructed with any one of the three Peircean signs. The interpersonal function is preserved as long as we, the recipients of the text, understand that its producer has something to say about reality. This link between the work and reality, or the ideational function, remains weak as long as icons and symbols are used – the material of politicians, journalists, bloggers, and businessmen trying to bury us under an avalanche of images and clichés. However, semiotic potential is quite different from the instructions of the icon or the never-mind-because-it-is-what-it-is symbol. Semiotic potential means creating an opening to reality.

Instead of expressing our personal or socially determined views in the hope that recipients will be foolish enough to go along with them, we can let reality itself have its say or allow it to reveal itself by letting it produce, through us, indexes. A mode can also be a way of downloading nonlinguistic reality in formats we can understand. And reality – that is what lies outside the medium: life itself. It is that which has value, no matter how we feel about it.

To make meaning is to make value, social semiotics says. But in my view, value precedes meaning. Value is your mother who loves you when you are still tiny and fragile. It is nature, which was busy for billions of years before

we came on the scene. It is art, which gives reality the chance to yet realize the opportunities that nature has missed, in something as fragile as a mode, a few semiotic resources arranged in such a way that they resound with the absolute.[16]

notes

This essay was written after a lengthy conversation with Gunther Kress at the Institute of Education of the University of London on February 20, 2014, during which he informed me: "We never trademarked the notion of the mode, so you can do whatever you like with it."

1. Daniel N. Stern, M.D., *Forms of Vitality: Exploring Dynamic Experience in Psychology, the Arts, Psychotherapy, and Development*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Also see: Daniel Stern, "Vitality Forms, or How We Know That We Are Alive," in: Joke Brouwer, Arjen Mulder, Lars Spuybroek (eds.), *Vital Beauty*, Rotterdam: V2_Publishing/NAi Publishers, 2012.
2. Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1953.
3. The concept was developed in a series of books, the most important of which are: Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress, *Social Semiotics*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988; Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*, London: Hodder Education, 2001; Theo van Leeuwen, *Introducing Social Semiotics*, London: Routledge, 2004; and Gunther Kress, *Multimodality*, London: Routledge, 2010.
4. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith), New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
5. Gunther Kress, email to the author, March 30, 2014.
6. James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1986.
7. Donald MacKay, *Information, Mechanism and Meaning*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: The M.I.T. Press, 1969. Also see: Arjen Mulder, *From Image to Interaction*, Rotterdam: V2_Publishing/NAi Publishers, 2010.
8. Adrian Mackenzie, *Transductions: Bodies and Machines at Speed*, London and New York: Continuum, 2002.
9. Ana Caterina Rodriguez, *Reading Modes*, Utrecht: MaHKU Editorial Design, 2013.
10. During the interview on Feb. 20, 2014.
11. Interview, Feb. 20, 2014
12. I am following the diagram from another seminal work in social semiotics: M. A. K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, London: Arnold, 1978.
13. Robbert Pfaller, *Ästhetik der Interpassivität*, Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2008.
14. Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
15. C. S. Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (Justus Buchler, ed.), London: Dover Publications, 2011.
16. An afterthought: Gunther Kress said in an email to the author (note 5): "Not having had a response to your question about value in time, but not having stopped thinking about it, I would say: 'Value is an effect of the all aspects of semiotic work that I put into my ensemble of signs-as-text for you, the intended recipient. I do semiotic work for you: lavishly, caring about you, wishing you to benefit from my work; or: I do minimal semiotic work for you, suggesting that you'd better do some work for yourself, on your part, and don't expect me to help you, you lazy useless bum: the value my present government attaches to its messages of every kind in all modes to many of those it would rather NOT see as members of the same social. Power and its uses are inseparable from value." And he added: "But of course that is too quick, and more careful, detailed thinking needs to be done … ;))"

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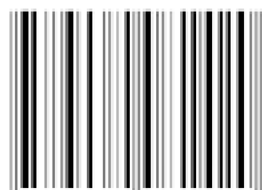
What if the exchanges we call economic were part of a much larger, far older and more diffuse system of exchange? What if value were defined not by accumulation but by circulation, and circulation not by supply and demand but by honor, glory and beauty? For one thing, it would be impossible to develop a critique of political economy from a political or economic viewpoint, because something in this notion of value utterly escapes both disciplines. In this volume, a diverse set of authors share a strikingly similar analysis. The crisis of our institutions of government, finance and knowledge, they argue, should be attributed not to a lack of political will but to a lack of glory and honor – categories that have been linked to gift and sacrifice from time immemorial.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