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Viewing through art

The Artist- Philosopher

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Detail of painting (Oil on wood, found object.)
Title: the not yet up-and-coming artist

Abstract:

This is a reflection about my views on philosophy and art, and my approach to the latter. I also look into my personal history briefly connecting it with broader aspects of art history. The text is a personal reflection in an attempt to understand what I'm doing and why I do it.

Viewing through art

The Artist- Philosopher

In this text I will reflect on what I'm doing and how I got here. I will begin with a short reflection on the current artworld, then continuing with my philosophical views and how it relates to my artistic approach in connection with artistic references. In the end I'm trying to conclude on something. Please don't expect a clear-cut answer. It might not even exist an answer to the question: What am I really doing?

What is expected of a current artist?

My artistic statements have often fallen into the category of an explanation. Almost making a case for my right to do art. Looking back, I think that I have felt that I needed some sort of justification for my practice. It's kind of sad in a way, obviously everyone has the right to make art. Looking at the art world though, I think that a lot of contemporary art is made with a clear message behind it. This could be promoting or resisting an idea, political view or to focus on an incident or crisis. They know what they want to achieve with their art. But is it also okey to embrace the not knowing?

Stepping back, the demand for a clear message is not there. There is no one really requiring you to plead your case. The contemporary art scene is not that stringent. It seems quite broad and open. Last year I attended a lecture with the old art historian Gunnar Danbolt. He described the key characteristic of the contemporary art scene as diversity (Danbolt.2021). The definition of art in a modern context is wide and includes new forms of art. Relative to its history, it is a less hierarchical scene. By hierarchical I mean in the type of genre. Historically, you had some programmatic genres, like religious or historic paintings during the Renaissance for instance, thought of as nobler than others (Belton.1996). Obviously, some mediums still are more sellable in a capitalist perspective, but the different forms of fine art are unranked in other forms of value than the monetary.

Furthermore, Danbolt stated that art today is not so much about what the artist means with the artwork, but how the viewer interprets it². This is of course the case with all art that survives time. No one can predict what will occupy the thoughts of the future human. The art survives because the artwork expands further than the artist's intentions. Together with the work itself, the spectator create new meaning.

It could obviously be that the need for justification came from a doubt within me. Maybe I was the one I was really trying to convince. Is this real? Or is it just a scam?

For a long time, I was afraid to fully commit to my art. Like most children, I tended some artistic practices. I used to sneak up at night to draw comic figures in the scarce light of a flashlight besides my brother's sleeping face. I never stopped drawing, but out of cowardness I suppose, I hoped art was something I could do on the side. When I sort of decided on an occupation, I went on to a master's degree from Oslo School of Architecture and Design, and later started to work as an Industrial Designer. My idea at the time was that this practice was close to fine art. In some aspects the craftsmanship overlaps, but on the flip side, fundamentally, it does not. The design we learned followed a firm model: define a clear goal, make a plan, prototype and test the result.

² Danbolt find support on his views in the text «Altermodernism» by Nicolas Bourriaud.

Fine art, on the other hand, does not always originate with a clear idea of what you want to accomplish. Of course, I am not saying that having a clear goal excludes something from being art. I'm just saying you don't need one. This is reflected in how I make art. I never have a clear picture of the outcome. I add and subtract and add again, searching for something.



Work in progress for master show. Oil on linnen 170 x 250 cm
Working title: hva koster et eple nå for tiden?

The self-pitying philosopher:

I hope this does not come across as whining. I do not feel very sorry for myself. At least not most of the time. On the contrary, I consider myself quite lucky, living in Norway, having a studio with a view and the luxury of an art academy for the price of nothing. I do often have this melancholy, sorrowful gaze though. It is not a direct sorry-about-my-life look. It's more of an inner longing, for something unparticular, which probably never is going to be fulfilled. And I do have a lot of questions. Like, how do you handle it? All of it. How do you view it, stay in it, live it?

A history teacher once told me: To understand anything at all, you must look into its history. He obviously thought of huge events, like the conflict between Palestine and Israel, but even in the small inner conflicts, It's impossible to detach yourself from the line of history. All the bricks the future is made from, are the historical building blocks. Nothing more. But the total sum of it overgrows the sum of every single ingredient, and it can never be separated back into the same pieces.

Before I went on to Architecture school, when I really didn't know what the hell I was doing, I took a Bachelor of Philosophy. Studies in Philosophy come in many variations, my heart always was closest to the impracticable, for instance the studies of ontology and phenomenology. Like all young, brave, and stupid people, full of the confidence only the youth possess, I liked Nietzsche the most. Still, I fancy him in a way. And even though I'm aware of the danger of referencing Nietzsche, falling into the cliché of angry young boys in an anti-establishment rebellion, I will take the risk. My focus will be less on angry-and-mad Nietzsche, and more on his epistemology and his critique of western metaphysics.

My philosophical stance is that we do not fully understand the world outside ourselves. It may be more or less similar, but not identical to our impression. Our perception will always be an abstraction of reality, just as photography always will be a simplification. Descartes showed us ages ago, that the mind may be fooled, and that we really know nothing more than that we exist as something³. Still, this Skeptical position is not very fruitful when it comes to addressing our life here and now, and I think that the reality most of us agree upon, the intersubjective, is all we have to play with. This, of course, doesn't mean that you can't be critical of how we process what we perceive.

In Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, he goes on a full-frontal attack on western metaphysics. His main argument is that it's too logical and only focused on the measurable things in life. The title both refers to the Greek Tragedy, which Nietzsche viewed as the ideal art form, and to the point in Greek philosophy, where Socrates, through Plato's writing, suppressed the Dionysian spirit and let the Apollon take over. Dionysus is the god of wine, feasts, and animal drives, while Apollon is the god of truth, pure knowledge, and logic. This created a split between poetry and philosophy, which before had been intertwined. Furthermore, it raised logic above art. A hierarchy which has followed western metaphysics from Socrates until present time (Nietzsche.1872).

This has in turn inflicted the way we perceive the inner and outer world. We believe we know the truth about the world, but our truth is only based on our lofty anthropocentric systemization of it. Nietzsche advocates a more intuitive perception, based on our intuition and not our need for cataloging and calculation (Nietzsche.1873.p.330-41). This can be achieved through art, because art can shake us out of our learned patterns. "A creature of reason" is to say, a creature of habit (Smith.2018.p.22). This makes us blind to experience the world as it is, right here and now.

Nietzsche calls for a hybridization in the way we perceive the world. He may not be the first Artist-philosopher, but he coined the term (Smith. 2018.p. 5). This is someone who sees the world through art. Someone who lets carnal desire back into the equation. This contrasts with the divine beauty Socrates was searching for. The same divine element later philosophers like Kant also looked for in art. For Kant, "*Aesthetic pleasure is the purely mathematical pleasure derived from the judgment of form*" (Smith.2018.p. 20). Nietzsche wanted to take the artistic experience back from these abstracted universal truths, he wanted it to be a physical and natural experience.

³ The modern thought experiments by Gilbert Harman, the Brain in a Vat, or popular films like the Matrix, illustrate the same thing.

The artist philosopher:

As you probably have guessed by now, I want to be an artist-philosopher. Of course, I do! To clarify, I do not think Nietzsche was against science and technology per se. He was definitely against religious power, maybe his most famous quote being “God is dead” (Thus Spoke Zarathustra). Science has historically been the greatest enemy to religious power. I do not think he would enjoy Donald Trump for instance, twisting and turning science to validate his own small, and very local, agenda. It would obviously be impossible to move back to a pre-science-society. I surely don’t want to go back. I do enjoy the relief from painkillers, and the joy of seeing through contact lenses and with electrical light.

I believe Nietzsche’s point is that we now only use science in the way we perceive the world. He is against the self-righteousness this scientific “knowledge” gives us, and he wants us to see the world in light of the fact that we too are a living part of it. We are animals, with drives and lusts and so on. Heidegger, one of the main characters continuing Nietzsche’s battle, may be even more critical to technology. But it’s not technology in itself, which is the problem, it is how it’s inflicting our thinking. Yes, technology gives us a lot of comforts, but it also deprives us from something, something that is bigger than comfort, namely true Being.

It is hard to grasp to which exact point Heidegger wants us to move back, but I do think he makes some valid points. At the same time as technology has lifted our standard of living, it is the root of many of our problems. The world is undeniably in a human driven extinction phase, and it seems very hard for us to let go of our comforts to save some of it. Even if science finds a solution to global warming, it will not free us from the mindset of exploitation and new threats. As Jean Baudrillard puts it “*the closer technology gets to perfection, the closer it brings us to extinction.*” (Smith.2018.p. 6).

Heidegger’s term of his current time “the essence of Technology”, is even more fitting today. New technology is made to be addictive. We do have more tools than ever, but at the same time that new tools are dropped down on us they come with a dark and confusing backside. They force us to be more available, to be more efficient. They show to be great instruments for manipulation and surveillance. Design and technology are often put as answers to problems we are facing, but design tends to be affirmative of how things are.

I think it is naïve to think that a solution is within technology only, because, as Heidegger puts it “*science does not think*” (Heidegger.1954). Technology tends to be made out of what can be done, rather than what should be done. For instance, when scientists develop the artificial world of the Metaverse or try to prolong life into infinity, do they ask, how will this affect or benefit our life, here and now?

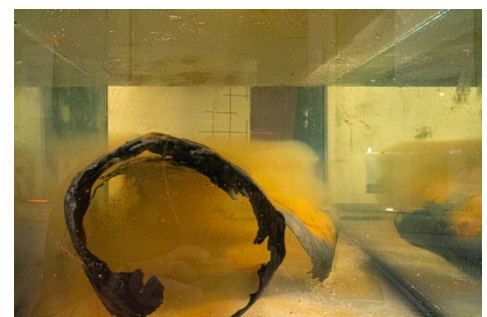
The age of technology and the individual way of seeing the world, deprives us of something. Our hierarchical way of being toward nature and animals is obviously sad because they are literally suffering and dying by the thousands, but it’s also sad on another level. It alienates us. It strips us from meaningfulness in a holistic perspective. I don’t think logic can fully frame existence. There are aspects of Being that are lost to rational and logical thinking (Heidegger.1927)

An artistic approach:

Here art could serve as a counterweight. It may offer an alternative world view, together with the prism of science. A sort of artistic intelligence, based on unexplainable influences or tactile knowledge. Or a poetic way perhaps, as Nietzsche would have put it, a way that opens for myths, feelings, and intersubjective impressions. Like how the portrait of Marlene Dumas captures some of the person's inner life with free form and color, or how the large-scale paintings of Julie Mehretu tell the story of the complexity of the modern world in a different way than science could. I love the way the scale of the work makes you a part of the image, surrounding you and making you a part of it.

I want to see the world through art. Not representing what we can see, but questioning how we see it. To use art as a hermeneutic tool. Where it is both an analytical tool, and some sort of dissemination. It does not need to follow any model for effective communication, and it should give another type of insight than an explanation. Like in the work of Nicole Eisenman. Her paintings and sculptures tell theatrical stories of queer sexuality, politics, and history with a humorous touch, in a way no other medium could. Her work is figurative, but abstract art is no enemy to art as allegory. In the expressive paintings of Mark Bradford you can feel his energy. They too are pictures of allegory. Telling stories of his upbringing, identity, and race in America. I admire how his huge paintings work as a whole, and at the same time work on a detailed level.

I also favor the multiple practices of Andro Wekua. His mix of sculptures and colorful paintings, and the way he works in the border between figurative and abstraction is something I admire. This could create a dialog between the work and the spectator. Art can be a conversation partner, creating a better understanding of the art and the world, reflecting at you, creating a different understanding of yourself. This is something I'm also trying to achieve.



Work for master show. Steel, plexiglas, natrium solotuion. 150 x 100 cm.
title: the ephermal

This rhetorical dialog between the art piece and the spectator, is one where the artist herself, doesn't need to take an active part. She could merely be a facilitator. The scientific domain of objectivity is not valid in art. Art emanates from a person. It is subjective. And the people who meet the art are not objective themselves, they come from somewhere with their own engrained impressions, their stories, interpreting the art in their own way. This does of course not mean that parts of this subjectivity, like prejudices, shouldn't be challenged.

Art stands out from other forms of expression, because a work could "work", even though you do not have a clue about the creator's intentions. I am fascinated by the prehistoric Lion-man or the many Venus-sculptures (obviously named in retrospect), without knowing anything about their creators, their objective or aim. I believe, a piece first becomes something more than its building blocks, when it meets the spectator, or the interpreter, to use a more active term. For something to be more than the sum of material or movements it consists of, it requires a meeting with a thinking being. Fine art should be *used*, albeit just rhetorically.

A work of art arises by a dialog between the piece and the audience, and in such, what an artwork really is it's not a fixed entity, it's a shifting reflexive process. The ones who view and interpret it, are also co creating it. The conversation is relative to time and a work that achieves a dialog, will never be truly finished, like finalized or perfect.

Art and time, from a personal perspective:

The approach of the artist-philosopher could surely be applied to multiple mediums, why do I choose the expression of figurative paintings and sculpture? My fascination of the visual language started with comic books and illustrations. My family was never art oriented, and we did not go to many art museums when I was a child. We frequently visited historical museums though, and I was always fascinated by the sculptures and drawings from earlier cultures. Across the globe, they speak a sort of similar universal language. Often combining myths, religion, nature and human. When I was a child, I found that this language spoke directly to me.

Through the language of shape and color, both in two-dimensional painting and three-dimensional figures, we have given form to ideas and abstract concepts. We have created a reality in addition to the already existing, the one we are thrown into. We have made it tangible and physical. When the written language finally developed, it was a tool for organization, for bookkeeping and logging.

In the book *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*, Yuval Harari emphasizes humans' ability to gather around myths, beliefs, and ideas without any physical anchoring (Harari.2015). Even though his views of the linear world evolution are contested now (Graeber.2021), no one doubts that humans always have made objects with no practical function.

When I moved to Copenhagen my interest in art grew. I took courses in art history, and I visited museums and churches looking for art from the Antiquity, Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Of course, the techniques and stunning look of the artworks were breathtaking, but the thing that always got me most interested, was the stories they told. Even though they were thousands of years old, glorifying long forgotten myths and religions, I found that they spoke of something I still could relate to, it was art as allegory, telling visual, sublime stories. Stories that stick with us because of these artefacts.

The drops I got of art theory also interested me. How we defined and changed definitions of what's art and what's not. I still remember Arthur Danto's text *The Artworld*, beginning with how "good" art was a mirror towards nature, a *trompe l'oeil*, before artists turned the mirror towards ourselves. For what is a mirror really for, other than to see the things about ourselves, that we can't see just with our own sight (Danto.1964).

One artistic style I found especially compelling was the expressionists. They turned the mirror inwards and their spontaneous and unplanned approach to art making, fascinates me.

Today artists still create with these expressive techniques. For instance, I think highly of the paintings of Angel Otero. His rough surfaces and the mix between abstraction and figurative is something I'm also trying to achieve. I want my work to be material. I want my art to be experienced tactile, not only seen.



Work in progress for master show.
Mixed media (oil paint, found objects, steel plates). 110 x 130 cm
Working title: *Paradis*

I am also thrilled by the paintings of Njideka Akunyili Crosby. The way she is twisting the perspective, making it flat and diagrammatical but containing some sort of depth, gives me the feeling of using art as a tool for understanding. She almost creates a map of personal images and memories. For me it reflects that our human perception of reality will always be less or more subjective. The mix of seeing, hearing, feeling and smelling, will always be colored by our earlier memoirs and build up expectations. Reality is never a freeze image, and our recognition of it, will always be an abstraction. I also want to achieve this in my work.



Work in progress for master show. Oil on linnen 150 x 225 cm
Working title: glemte vår i luften

An inconclusive conclusion:

Written in the late 1800, *The Birth of Tragedy* was written in a protest to modernity, thus giving a colorful input in a broader current debate. As Raymond Geuss so clearly puts it:

“This was a debate in which many of the participants, oddly enough, were broadly in agreement on a complex diagnosis of the problem, although, of course, they disagreed on the treatment. The diagnosis was that life in the modern world lacks a kind of unity, coherence, and meaningfulness that life in previous societies possessed. Modern individuals have developed their talent and powers in an overspecialized, one-sided way; their lives and personalities are fragmented, not integrated, and they lack ability to identify with their society in a natural way and play the role assigned to them in the world wholeheartedly. They cannot see the lives they lead as meaningful and good” (Geuss.1999.p.12)

And yet, 150 years later, I can relate. I grew up in the 90s. In the western world this was a happy period with a glowing belief in western liberal democracy. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the opening of China, and a technological boom from another world, Francis Fukuyama marked the time as *The End of History*. Early in 2000s the bubble bursts and the hope vaporized. The new time lost its innocence when the towers in New York collapsed. New friends became enemies again, and even at home in the free west, old divisions appeared. The table is set for increased global polarization. A ghost from the past again rides Europe, and a warm war disrupts the continent. In the background, the system seems unfit to tackle the huge contemporary crisis, the inequitable distribution of wealth, and the climate

crisis. Few trust the self-regulating force of the free market, and even though capitalism still seems like the only option, it has little magic left to offer.

Together with a diverse student background, I have had 15 jobs in seven cities in four different countries. Transient, young and dumb, thrown around in a neo-capitalistic world without the security of being a homeowner or being something of a professional, not even feeling at home in any nation, it's easy to lose track. I guess I am the global human Nietzsche criticizes in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The human being without a local grounded identity. I do read the world news every day, craving to be updated of incidents I can't influence. The constantly broadcasted misery, everywhere and anytime, in a live- real-time stream. The irony of it is that the more versions of the world I receive, the more distant reality seems. Nothing is real anymore. And what's unreal is hard to change. Powerless and numb.

Still, I'm searching for the right words. There is no ready elevator pitch. I don't know why I'm fascinated by the historic, the mystics, the stories which use to keep us together. Neither do I know why the things which are not made to be beautiful are more beautiful than the things which are made to be. A railway bridge out of steel, with the intertwined red beams, the broken or the even more brutal. And I don't mean beauty as pleasing or attractive, and I don't mean it in Plato's pure beauty is the same as Absolut Truth. I guess I mean beauty as interesting, or extraordinary, or something more than meets the eye. Like the way Lynda Benglis captures this ambiguity in her sculptures. A beauty which is easy to find in nature. As a person I'm most happy in there, but to portray nature appears alien. Of course, there is beauty in the human world as well. It lies hidden in the small encounters and in its shortcomings. In the coincidence or blunder, even in the error. My motives are always tracible to the human drama. Us and them. Our beliefs. The ideas I cling on to.

Art is my tool to investigate the world and our subjective understanding of it. My work begins in a notion, thought or phenomenon, and then turns in to a spontaneous process. I believe this makes me able to reach thoughts and feelings which spark and spin underneath. I want to make abstract concepts tangible by reducing them to physical constitutes: material, color, form. Does that not stimulate another type of reflection than words could?

I know I'm searching for something, but I can't formulate what's in the material or pigment. I attempt to master communication through color and shapes, The intuitive in it fascinates me. You don't have to learn to "read" a color. My artworks find themselves in a figurative tradition, they are containers for fragmented stories, but I don't want to give the whole story away. Abstracted elements are left for the interpreter to finish the work.

This approach is based on that we do understand the world through images and objects, and interactions with them and other beings. I do hope my works could work as thought- catalysts for the spectators, because, after all, we are not that different

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I have also based my text on earlier progress reviews written by myself and submitted to The Art Academy, NTNU. Given the personal topic, I think it's natural to build on earlier writings about my progress. Hence, it may be that some of the text overlaps with earlier text written by myself.