

ISLAND NEVER FOUND: Home, Terra, Island, Unleashed Power, Adventure, Mobility, No man's land or the Artist's Longing and Doubt

The undeniable and unmissable appealing and intriguing mystery of art—whenever and wherever it appears—in all of its forms and in all of its negation of previous forms, is basically and inseparably connected with its challenging, deep, sometimes shocking and destabilising power, which effects the life. The seemingly “useless”¹ work of art, as Hannah

¹ Hannah Arendt 168

Arendt puts it, in its extremity and alienness, in its autonomy and self-determination, is changing our feelings and intellectual orientation: it effects our life and relation to the time, to the place where we live, to the others, we live with.

The artist's engagement and obsession is to create this unique entity, this extremely concentrated and multilayered specific “micro-universe” which owns the capacity and competence of involving unlimited references, evocations, memories and perspectives of human experience in a suggestive and irresistible shape of solid internal coherence. The message of the artwork thus has its legitimacy from this coherence. It suggests a possible but not the only possible understanding of the things and happenings around us. There is always an uncertainty which destabilises our orientation but at the same time opens us up toward different perspectives and surprising connections between fields of experiences.

“In the case of art works, reification is more than mere transformation; it is transfiguration, a veritable metamorphosis in which it is as though the course of nature which wills that all fire burn to ashes is reverted and even dust can burst into flames. Works of art are thought things...”
—Hannah Arendt²

² Ibid. 168

In her book *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt describes a work of art as a phenomenon in which the permanence and durability of the world, its very stability, is revealed with a clarity and transience that can be found nowhere else. This function of the artwork, which otherwise – in the practical, tangible sense – is “useless”, consists in the fact that in it, the durability of the world appears in an absolutely clear form, so suggestive and brilliant that other perspectives of the perception of the world, other visions of reality, are opened up. “Because of their outstanding permanence, works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things; their durability is almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes, since they are not subject to

the use of living creatures... In this permanence, the very stability of the human artifice, which, being inhabited and used by mortals, can never be absolute, achieves a representation of its own. Nowhere else does the sheer durability of the world appear in such purity and clarity, nowhere else, therefore, does this thing-world reveal itself so spectacularly as the non-mortal home for mortal beings. It is as though worldly stability had become transparent in the permanence of art, so that a premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or of life, but of something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present...”³

³ Arendt 167 f.

There are two particularly important points here, which illuminate the specific significance of the artwork for human beings and reveal the essence of the central metaphor of *Islands Never Found*,⁴ namely the island. On the one hand, Hannah Arendt speaks of the possibility of experiencing, in and through the work of art, the durability of the world, the “worldly stability” that is impossible to perceive anywhere in the “thing-world”. This means that the work of art offers a unique, specific opportunity to perceive an aspect of existence directly, with the senses. The specific entity of the artwork consists in its ability to communicate an inherently clear, transparent and poetically effective vision of the world’s permanence, which is otherwise hidden by the thing-world.

⁴ Curated by Hegyi and Katerina Koskina, the exhibition was presented at the State Museum of Contemporary Art Thessaloniki, Palazzo Ducale, Genova, 2010

On the other hand, Hannah Arendt talks about the effect of the artwork on human beings. The immediate, moving experience of the durability of the world perceived through its transparent revelation in the work of art, the experience of a “premonition of immortality” as it were, opens up a perspective, a horizon, that allows human beings to perceive and understand their entire situation, their realities, in a different way. This cathartic experience, the comprehension of alternatives communicated through the aesthetic entity of the artwork, the ability to experience immortality metaphorically, one might say, to envision an imagined existence in immortality, is, in turn, related to the special status of the work of art. Perceived from this perspective, the artwork reifies a radical imaginary or fictional perfection of existence in which the alternatives of immortal life— which are practically impossible in the thing-world— appear to be possible.

This poetic, imaginary, fictional perfection relates to the alternative of the uncompromising—and, in the thing-world, practically impossible— essence of the world, its fundamental—and, in principle, unchangeable— immutable permanence and durability, even though individual mortals must die. Inherent in the experience of this “premonition of immortality” through a work of art is the interiorisation of metaphoric perfection, the metaphor of an imaginary, fictional homeland of unlimited – perfectly realised – life.

This second aspect of the special status of the work of art as a communicator of possible perspectives for thought, as a terrain upon which essential experiences can be perceived in transparent, clear forms – which is impossible in the thing-world – is related to the most important function of an artwork, namely its capacity to unveil essential realities, the “durability of the world.” It is only in this clarity and transparency that mortal human beings can find a “non-mortal home,” in which things “achieved by mortal hands” survive beyond their creators. All the values that are embodied in the works of mortal human beings are incorporated in this “non-mortal home.”

The specific capacity of a work of art to unveil essential realities and thereby offer a glimpse of the perspectives of creative perfection, a transparent revelation of the fundamental permanence of the world, enables human beings to see and contextualise their existence on a broader, more complex, more intensive, higher level through the perception of the artwork. The metaphor of the “non-mortal home” is a reference to this higher level. Although individual human beings must die, they comprehend—through the perception of an artwork—the “durability of the world” in full clarity and transparency, and precisely this experience enables them, despite their mortality, to find a “non-mortal home.” In other words, the perception of the “durability of the world”—in the experience of art—enables us to grasp the idea of a “non-mortal home” in which the basic values manifested in things created by “mortal hands” survive beyond individual human mortality. These values are part of the permanence of the world.

Thus, by giving human beings the chance to perceive the permanence of the world with a clearness and transparency impossible in the thing-world, and thereby offering a “premonition of immortality,” a work of art becomes an imaginary, rare terrain, a fictional island where immortality is a possibility; the very independence of this island from the pragmatic rules of usefulness and practical, functional realities permits a radicalness of clarity and transparency in which the “durability of the world” can be perceived in its purest form.

In this connection, immortality is a metaphor for the perfection of creativity and of work, for the non-transience of things made by human beings. Immortality means an unlimited capacity of creation, an uncompromising radicalness of all possible poetic constructions of thought, an unrestricted creativity and freedom of the imagination. A work of art discloses a “premonition of immortality,” which allows us to consider the existence and the creative work of human beings from a different, higher perspective. This intimation of a possible higher level, of a different, special way of viewing things, is the message communicated by a work of art, and as a result it stands, like an island, distant from the usual “thing-world.” On this island, with its “premonition of immortality,” the fictional, imaginary alternatives unfold: the improbable figures of unlimited, radical fantasy, the intelligible constructions of poetic effectivity, and they unfold with a radicalness, clarity and uncompromisingness that is not possible anywhere else. Such islands are strange lands where improbabilities find a natural home, because, having been liberated from the mandatory laws of necessity in the thing-world, they can manifest and develop imaginary constructions and alternative ideas in complete freedom and without compromise.

In his astute analysis of Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the picture, Raymond Bellour describes Deleuze’s perception of the figure in the paintings of Francis Bacon as “the figure that is improbability itself.” Raymond Bellour points out that Deleuze saw parallels between the writings of Marcel Proust and the paintings of Francis Bacon, in the sense that both of them rejected the “figurative, illustrative or narrative” function of literature or of painting and wanted to give sensual form to “thought-of or seen probabilities” through the radical independence of the text or of the picture. As Deleuze, speaking of Proust, claimed: “He himself spoke of truths that are written with the help of figures.”⁵ Paradoxically, it is



Barthélémy Togo, *Road to exile*, 2008

Wooden boat, bundles of fabrics, bottles

220 x 260 x 135 cm

Courtesy MAM Mario Mauroner Contemporary Vienna + Salzburg



Danica Dakic, *La Grande Galerie*, 2004

C-print on aluminium

100 x 128 cm

Edition 8 +2

© Danica Dakic / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn - SACK, Seoul, 2020

Photo: © Egbert Trogemann / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn-SACK, Seoul, 2020

precisely through the specifically created figure, which “is improbability itself,” that the artist can convey these “thought-of or seen probabilities.” The concept of improbability relates to the special status of the work of art, which is not bound by the laws of necessity in the world of things, nor by the illustrative, narrative functions of everyday speech, but can reify thought-of alternatives and the visions of wild imagination with unlimited radicalness and uncompromisingness.

The work of art is a specific domain where fundamental anthropological realities become graspable with radical intensity through the extremity of the figures of improbability. The work of art is an island of improbabilities, which, through the unrestricted radicalness of imagination, through independence from the pragmatic, limited, purpose-oriented functions of the world of things, through the freedom of alternative thinking – gives expression to highly important, fundamental and elementary experiences of inevitable realities with immediacy and power, making them, as Hannah Arendt writes, “tangibly present, to shine and to be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read.”⁶

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This radicalness, arising out of uncompromising, unrestricted, intensive concentration on the direct communication of basic realities, creates the feeling of a creativity, an inexhaustible power, that can withstand the mortality of human beings. The optimistic, romantic metaphor of the “non-mortal home” refers to the competence and ability of art to reify basic values—which are not clearly manifested in the thing-world, which in the practical processes of the organisation of life and purpose-oriented work are not transparent and graspable in any concentrated form – in the extreme forms of art and to make them perceivable. The metaphor of the “non-mortal home” suggests no religious visions of eternity, but rather gives us the hope that not everything will be lost when we die, that we will not disappear into oblivion, that we need not surrender to the desolation of limitations and intellectual constriction.

This metaphor is one of *activism*, based on the work of mortal human beings, and reinforces human immanence; its central focus is on the preservation of the values human beings create. The work of art offers a domain where these values can be preserved, where they can live on. It also means that everything we have to lose is the result of human creativity, the work of “mortal hands.” For this reason, Hannah Arendt emphasises the importance of human immanence in the immortality metaphor: “It is as though worldly stability had become transparent in the permanence of art, so that a premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or of life, but of something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present...”⁷

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This rich, complex metaphor—which reinforces human immanence, confirms the creative perfection of work and suggests an alternative way of viewing the world—refers at the same time to the specific entity of the artwork as a terrain of revelation of fundamental experiences and to the effect of the artwork as a communicator of alternative ways of viewing the world and thereby of a new self-recognition. In this connection, there is a parallel to Nietzsche’s extremely complex metaphor of “life”. To Nietzsche, the metaphor of “life” relates to a radical perfection and also to an alternative way of viewing the world. As Christoph Menke describes: “This programme of a transformation of practice aims at a

different way of doing things. It is different from the model of action. 'Aesthetic transformation of practice' means: breaking the power of the concept of action (and all other related concepts: purpose, reasons, intention, capability, self-confidence etc.) with respect to being active. The doctrine of artists is: One can be active in other ways than in the purpose-oriented, self-confident exercise of practical capability. Nietzsche's term for describing this other way of engaging in activity, other than action, is 'life'. Being active in the way that artists are active does not mean performing actions, it means 'living'.⁸

⁸ Menke 114

The metaphor 'life' suggests radically and uncompromisingly realised perfection that arises not in the context of practical, purpose-oriented action, but in artistic "doing". This emphasises the special status and the specific entity of art as a terrain where a suggestive, unlimited perfection that is graspable with the senses can be realised. This radical perfection, this independence from the rules and causalities of the purpose-oriented actions of the thing-world, is only possible on the terrain of art, in the artist's "doing". "In artistic perfection, in the artist's Dionysian 'doing', on the other hand, we do not have a subject performing an action to realise a known and wanted purpose, but rather someone acting in the grip of intoxication to realise— himself: 'The human being in this condition transforms things until they reflect his power, until they are reflections of his perfection.' The 'aesthetic doing and seeing' consequently leads to a transformation, a perfection of things. But this change that it precipitates is not brought about in the artistic activity: it is not the purpose of this activity. Artistic activity is not based or oriented on any purpose at all. Artistic activity is the 'reflection' or 'communication' of the state the artist is in when he does what he does.... When Nietzsche describes it as 'intoxication', he means, as in the birth of tragedy, a state of 'heightened power and fullness', which he here again refers to as 'Dionysian'.⁹

⁹ Ibid. 112

Like Nietzsche, Arendt too, emphasises the basic difference between the purpose-oriented action of a subject in the thing-world and purposeless artistic activity, and points out the qualitative difference between useful objects and "useless" works of art.¹⁰ The lack of a purpose is related to a claim to perfection, to unlimited, uncompromising creation, since purpose-oriented action is necessarily limited, being restricted to the fulfilment of a previously known, deliberate, specific function. The purposelessness of artistic activity positions the artwork outside of the thing-world and makes radicalness, concentration and the unlimited heightening of creative powers possible. Nietzsche, on the other hand, speaks of "powers" as of an activity outside of consciousness; powers are unconscious. This is what he means by intoxication: intoxication is a state in which the subject's powers are so greatly intensified that they are beyond the subject's conscious control. Or conversely: the unleashing of powers in intoxication consists in their transcending the aggregate state of self-conscious capacity that they preserve in purpose-oriented action. "Therefore, a human being in a Dionysian state of heightened powers is defined by an essential inability: 'the inability not to react (similarly to certain hysterics, who assume a role at the slightest provocation)': the inability to act as the power to be compelled to react aesthetically, to be compelled to express oneself."¹¹

¹⁰ Arendt 167. Cf Arendt: "Because of their outstanding permanence, works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things; their durability is almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes, since they are not subject to the use of living creatures, a use which, indeed, far from actualising their own inherent purpose—as the purpose of a chair is actualised when it is sat upon—can only destroy them. Thus their durability is of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all; it can attain permanence throughout the ages."

¹¹ Menke 113

This inability to act within the context of the thing-world creates the specific sensitivity and radicalness, autonomy and *un-restrictedness* that



Kimsooja, *Bottari Truck – Migrateurs*, 2007

Single Channel Video Projection, silent, 10:00, loop, performed in Paris

Commissioned by Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-De-Marne (MAC/VAL)

Still Photo by Thierry Depagne. Courtesy Kimsooja Studio and KEWENIG, Berlin



Richard Long, *Mediterranean Arc*, 2008

Stones

730 cm radius

Courtesy the artist and Tucci Russo Studio per l'Arte Contemporanea, Torre Pellice

Photo: Archivio fotografico Tucci Russo, Torre Pellice

is needed in order to be active outside the context of purpose-oriented action: to strive for improbabilities—one might say to create without restrictions—to have alternative ideas that do not accept any of the boundaries set by purpose-oriented goals. In this specific state, on the terrain of art, on the island of the artist, a hyper-intensive artistic process of perfecting takes place, without limitations and without restricting purposes or goals: be they practical, political, didactic or moral. On the island of art, this radical perfecting process becomes palpable, and this intensive experience offers a glimpse of alternative perspectives, of higher horizons, thereby revealing, in Nietzsche's sense, a different "life" or, in the words of Hannah Arendt, a "premonition of immortality." On the terrain of art, on the island of the artist, there is a hint of something that in everyday life, in the purpose-oriented thing-world, cannot be seen or experienced with such immediacy, with such radicalness and intensity. Here we are given an unrestrainedly radical, unlimitedly intensive, highly concentrated, unembellished, unfiltered experience of fundamental realities. That is why Nietzsche calls this fundamental encounter, this radical, unlimited, elementary experience simply "life", a strong metaphor, as we see, for perfection or perfecting, and he suggests that everything else is not real life, or at least is only limited action based on certain purpose-oriented goals. In artistic activity, perfecting acquires a radical intensity that cannot be described in the terms of purpose-oriented action.

In this connection, Christoph Menke believes: "The essential step in an aesthetic transformation of practice consists therefore in learning, from the artist's example, to make a conceptual decision: in learning, in the field of activity, to distinguish between action and life. The first result of this newly acquired ability to discriminate is a new description of the field of practicality. Anyone who has learned from artists that it is possible to be active without being involved in action can see how practicality spreads into life everywhere, downwards as well as upwards... 'Life, one concludes from this new aesthetic description, is both the lowest (in descriptive terms, most elementary) and the highest (in normative terms, most sophisticated) concept of a philosophy of practicality: 'life' is the destiny of *movement* and *goodness*."¹²

¹² Ibid. 114

This real 'life' reveals itself through the heightened "powers" of intoxication, through the radicalness, extremity and total *unrestrictedness* of artistic doing. Radical imagination, liberation from any sort of purpose-oriented, practical, limited goals, the development of forms and narratives of improbabilities, lead to an intensification of fundamental experiences. In this respect, the contemporary artists Gilbert & George say: "If you want to be a speaking artist, you have to be totally crazy, MAD, extreme. Otherwise it doesn't work. You have to be a complete outsider, totally alone. If you are part of something, nothing will happen."¹³ Crazy, madness, extremity, radicalness are elements of the intoxication that enables artists to place themselves, in a sense, outside the laws of normality, outside the pragmatic thing-world, outside purpose-oriented action.

¹³ Gilbert & George 94

Consequently, the artist achieves a special status that offers the possibility—even if it is not always accepted everywhere, without conditions, without argument, by everyone, by the entire community, by the cultural environment —of uninhibited, indiscriminate, radical, unrestrictedly autonomous language and creative form. This free,

concentrated, autonomous language focuses on what is important, on the essence of things, even if this appears in the seemingly most trivial, imperceptible, unobtrusive banalities and their observation. The expression “speaking artist” used by Gilbert & George refers to this radicalness of language, of speaking out, of the fundamental vocation of the artist to say something important, fundamental, essential. Nietzsche’s metaphor of “life”, Hannah Arendt’s “durability of the world,” and Gilbert & George’s “speaking artist,” all imply that the ability and competence to create a highly concentrated, radically intensified, uninhibited and uncompromising, unfiltered state of extreme sensitivity are inherent in artistic activity. If an artist is involved in any kind of action, if he is “part of something.” If he is not a complete outsider, he cannot achieve this state of exceptional autonomy and thus will be not be capable of being a “speaking artist.” It is only this outsider position that makes it possible for artists to have the radicalness and extreme sensitivity with which to reveal a new entity through what they do.

But the artist’s outsider position also creates loneliness, isolation, apartness from pragmatic, comprehensible, purpose-oriented actions; precisely this radicalness and hyper-intensity, this uncontrollable madness, this extremity, *un-restrictedness* and exceptional autonomy create the island, which becomes not only the land of perfection, the special, peculiar terrain of intensified experience of fundamental realities, the field of unlimited sensitivity, but also an island of alienation and apartness, of loneliness and mistrust, of imprisonment and doubt.

Apartness and strangeness, exterritoriality and extremity, intensity and radicalness—in short, to “march to a different drummer”—characterise the adventure, which, according to Georg Simmel, has a basic similarity with the work of art. “It is precisely when continuity with life is disregarded on principle in this way, or rather, when it does not even have to be disregarded—when something is already there that is alien, untouchable, marching to a different drummer—that we speak of adventure. It lacks that reciprocal penetration with the adjoining parts of life through which life becomes whole. It is like an island in life which determines its beginning and its end by means of its own formative powers, and not, like a piece of a continent, together with those of what is on either side of it. [...] For it is the nature of a work of art that it cuts a piece out of the endless, ongoing flow of perceivable comprehensibility or experience, takes it out of its context, and gives it a self-sufficient form, as if determined and held together by some internal centre. That a part of existence is woven into its uninterruptedness, is nevertheless experienced as a whole, as a complete unit – this is the form that a work of art and an adventure have in common.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Simmel 41

Adventure: another complex, poetically dense, powerful, effective metaphor for the ability of an artist to create, out of an inner formative power, an extremely intense and autonomous form of existence “outside the usual continuity of this life.”¹⁵ With the ‘adventure’ metaphor, Georg Simmel describes the special status of artistic activity, one might say the specific entity of the work of art, which, through its provocative independence, through its eccentricity in “marching to a different drummer,” through its radical “detachment from the meshes and links of the purposes in life,” is able to centre itself “in a meaning that exists of itself.”¹⁶ Such extremity, *unattachedness*, exterritoriality insists on staying “outside the usual continuity of this life,” refuses to become involved in the

¹⁵ Ibid. 39

¹⁶ Ibid. 40



Siobhán Hapaska, *Playa de los Intranquilos*, 2004

Fibreglass, two pack acrylic paint, sand, palm tree trunks, synthetic foliage, coconuts, nylon, plastic and glass

Dimensions variable

Edition of 3

Courtesy the artist and Kerlin Gallery

pragmatic causalities of the thing-world, removes itself from the logic of life and is thereby capable of capturing perfection and radical intensity. Through their uncompromising independence and “detachment from the meshes and links,” the adventure and the artwork “are perceived, in all the one-sidedness and coincidence of their substance, as if all of life were somehow concentrated and completed in each of them. And this seems to happen not to a lesser degree, but more perfectly, because the artwork stands altogether outside of life as a reality, the adventure is something totally separate from the uninterrupted, connected process of life in which each element is interwoven with its neighbors. Precisely because the artwork and the adventure stand apart from life..., the one and the other are analogous to the totality of life itself.”¹⁷ That is the reason for the enigmatic, indisputable, powerful effect of a work of art, namely the intense experience of a feeling of wholeness, the dramatic encounter with the hyper-intensive, concentrated totality of life, which can be grasped precisely in this form of extreme strangeness, of unusual, eccentric separateness. On this exterritorial island of anomalies, in this strange land of improbabilities, where “that reciprocal penetration with the adjoining parts of life”¹⁸ is missing, we experience a feeling of extremely intensive wholeness and perfection of the various areas of life and experience. Exterritoriality, detachment, separation from the rational contexts of life, or—to use Nietzsche’s words—artistic doing, rather than practical, purpose-oriented action, or, as Hannah Arendt describes it, the uselessness of the artwork and its special status in the thing-world, or what Gilbert & George call extremity, craziness, *uncompromising outsidersness* and radical loneliness as the price of the freedom and independence of “speaking artists”: all these metaphors refer to the specific ability of art to create an alternative reality that is more real than the given, graspable realities in non-artistic areas of organised life.

¹⁷ Ibid. 41

¹⁸ Ibid. 41

The artist, lonely in his final decisions, alone on his island, incapable of ever knowing whether it is really his own island, his suitable, prepared, living terrain, nor even – to take it further – whether it exists anywhere at all, seeks ways and means of grasping the intensification of the feeling of experiencing something fundamental and complete, in other words, of achieving perfection. The artist, just like his kinsman, the adventurer, “finds a central feeling about life that leads through the eccentricity of the adventure and, precisely in the great distance between the accidental, externally given happenings of the adventure and the centre of existence that pulls everything together and gives it meaning, produces a new, meaningful necessity of his life.”¹⁹ It is this “meaningful necessity of life” that reveals itself on the artist’s strange, distant island, often very far from us, often never found or found too late, and nevertheless reachable for everyone.

¹⁹ Ibid. 43

(Translation by Beverley Blaschke, Vienna)

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