

What if art created our world?

Johannes Alexander Kronenberg

International Congress of Fine Arts Istanbul

Professor Peter Sonderer

March 2013

What if art created our world?

Imagine yourself in front of a mirror. Look at your body, your eyes and hands. What if you were a passive being, living a primary based life? What if there was no force that called you, called you to wake up in the morning, to be active, to be alive? What if there was no possibility to develop your eyes, seeing behind the primary being that stands at the other side of the mirror?

Imagine that the mirror would implode in a thousand pieces, and you, you had the chance to use your body, your eyes and hands to rebuild it; rebuild it like an artist creating a masterpiece. Imagine that moment, there would be a possibility to do it in the way you came for; the reason you wake up for, every day again. The reason that you can use your eyes to see more than you are actually looking at. That moment would be the image of a new beginning, a start to use your body, your eyes and hands to do what you love to do, to do what makes you 'unmissable' on this planet, what makes you feel alive and inspires other people to listen to you.

Imagine you finished the masterpiece you just discovered, looking up and seeing another mirror in front of you. You would use your eyes and look at it, look at the being you now see in that mirror. And then, suddenly, little dots will arise at the horizon, will come closer and will stop next to you. The dots turn into primary based beings that will look in the mirror, beings that live a passive life and did not hear the force that called them, called them to wake up every morning, to be active, to be alive. Beings who do not use their eyes to see behind their reflection, to see what they are actually looking at. Imagine it would be your task to help them using their body, eyes and hands to do what they love to do, to do what makes them 'unmissable' for you and the planet, what makes them feel alive and inspire other people to listen to them.

It would be you that created a masterpiece, a missed piece that was called by everybody. Called to wake up every morning, to be active, to be alive and to do what it loves to do. Creating your person, the world, the present and the future.

Play like you did before, dream like you dreamed before and you will see where you looked before.

Introduction

When I have sleepless nights a potential of creation appears. It starts with being both in dream worlds and being, pulled back in physical life. This movement is accompanied, by some strong irrational feelings that end up in the physical world. They are the most powerful urge to create; feelings balancing between the world of dreams and physical life. One of those sleepless nights I have used to write my abstract: 'What if art created our world'. In my paper I will try to move closer to these feelings and shape them into a concrete form. To achieve this, the paper has two parts. In the first one *space to create* will be the main subject, in the second I will discuss a related upcoming art practice in Holland, ending with a statement about the artist's responsibility.

Free space to develop will create creation

I was born with a strong urge to create; to shape feelings into ideas, and ideas into palpable reality. To respond to this urge free space to think and talk about those feelings is required, to shape them into ideas and practice skills to create a creation. As a child this fundamental path of developing this gift of creating should be provided by a healthy environment. A free space to develop. Schools, Universities and art academies are places to develop and encourage this requirement. At least, that is what they should strive for.

This subject of the relationship between education systems and providing free space to let children create their own development is one of the biggest problems in contemporary time, for as one of the TED-speakers recently stated: 'Schools kill creativity'¹ and destroy the free space to develop children's needs to grow up in a healthy environment. The argument is that education systems seems to be made in the first place for an economical purpose, which forces and organizes children into a shape which fits them into the (economical) system. In Holland for instance, children should choose for their final direction of interest already when they are only 15 years old. They have to choose, for instance, health and nature studies, culture and society studies et cetera. This choice determines their path at an early stage, -and rules out- future possibilities of development. For me, as an artist, art gives me an environment in which I can develop within circumstances of free space. A space where I can talk about my feelings and ideas to learn and practice skills to create, until I'm able to construct shapes which are the result of a healthy environment and that give a positive effect on the environment around me. A constructive addition.

¹ 'Ken Robinson says Schools kill creativity'
http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html

Childhood is a very important period, as we all know, to develop creation and to find out what you really are and what you want. If the space is not provided to do so, identity problems can pop-up in adult life.² Doing a job or living a life you do not want to live is one of the most negative and destructive ways to be on this planet. Being reduced to an economical tool, to serve and obey a consumption-oriented society could characterize this passive and destructive grid. The Belgium professor of clinical psychology and psychoanalysis Paul Verhaeghe talks and writes about this identity problems, which are formed by the neo liberalistic system we live in³. A statement could be: lack of free space to develop in early life can cause alienation and a destructive way of life on later age.

Intermezzo

On the academy of art I have the opportunity to develop my feelings and ideas into a shape that fits my potential to create. Personal tutors give a constructive structure to develop individual possibilities and help developing them into the right direction. That is the direction that fits ones strengths the most. This, by the way, is the main reason that I am now able to participate in this conference and write something about my ideas relating to art.

My own use of art is to ask questions in the first place. As a child we have to answer a lot of questions during all those tests we undergo. Now I am in the position that it is not necessary anymore to answer those questions. I can wonder without a responsibility to answer any questions. I think this exactly is what I need to approach questions on an open and constructive way. With my answers I want to give a possible perspective and try to leave space for one another. Of course this is easier to say then to practice.

Before I go on with my topic, I want to approach a definition of art that is very important according this paper and the International Congress of Fine Arts in Istanbul. Talking about somebody or something without knowing it in the first place feels not properly. A lot of people including philosophers and artists are talking about art since a long time. It almost seems that every person regarding or not to the field of art has his or her own opinion and view on art.⁴ Which I see as something good, because that shows the open character art offers. Exactly this open character of art can be described as the magical and powerful core of what art might be. There is no definition or meaning that covers art entirely. What we can cover, define and use about art, are multiple aspects around this magical and powerful core. One of these aspects is: *making people conscious about the time where they live in*. This 'task' is associated to *raise questions*. That is also what makes the difference between philosophers and artists. An artist evokes questions and a philosopher shapes them into thoughts and words.

² 'Paul Verhaeghe in WeStrikeBack in Vooruit' <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOr-AVAwDms>

³ Idem, and also for more information about this topic his recently published book 'Identiteit'

⁴ '1460 Antworten auf die Frage: was ist Kunst?' Andreas Mäckler

Contemporary creation

If there is this 'free space to develop', what kind of creation will arise and how do we use it? A question with a million answers, but regarding to art I want to look at a contemporary upcoming creation in the field of art in Holland.

In the '60 of the last century a very special and well known artist came on stage: Joseph Beuys. An artist who gave a lot of answers but provoked even more questions. His 'social sculpture' grounded a base for social art⁵. On this fundament, artists started to build. For example one of my own tutors, Johan Wagenaar. Around 1995 he founded 'Het Instituut'⁶, an art institute that focuses on society and social problems. Together with all kinds of scientists and artists, the art institute takes the challenge to solve or give a different perspective on society and social problems. A lot of critique on and resistance to the initiative was the first result. The art scene in Holland was not enthusiast. Nowadays, however, it seems that there is more space to talk about this aspect of art. The troublesome discussion and taboo about art and theory seems to come in an open field. In the last century art and theory were two separate things in Holland; - now some so-called art lecturers (professors) - try to fade away the dualistic view between art and theory⁷. This helps a lot by approaching society and social problems with an artistic view. Doing research through the perspective and mentality of an artist, can provide new points of view. As an artist you can use your artistic abilities to add an artistic creation to a social project of teamwork between all kinds of people and disciplines. The artwork is not a physical object that carries the name 'art', but fuses in a bigger creation of mankind, something what Beuys might have called a 'social sculpture'. A creation that was created by free space to develop one's own interest. Maybe that also is a part of Beuys' 'Erweiterte Kunstbegriff'⁸.

A recent work that I made regarding social art is called 'Embodied memories'. For a collaboration between the Institute of Arts where I study⁹ and local care homes, I did research about and worked together with elderly people with dementia and with their caretakers. The main thought of this research and 'artistic reaction' that I had in mind, was that I could not say anything about the elderly people without being in contact with them as much as possible. I visited the care homes and tried to be part of the usual day activities. This situation was formed into an interaction between my studio and the care homes. I recognized that I could not compare their situation with my own, let alone equalizing them (I saw that a lot of people did by feeling sorry for them). The next step was not to take a look at what

⁵ Beuys, Joseph. Beuys über Beuys - Ein Gespräch. WDR. Duitsland. Januari 1985.

⁶ Het Instituut, Johan Wagenaar

⁷ Denken in kunst, Peter Sonderer

⁸ Joseph Beuys - Über den erweiterten Kunstbegriff <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lMre2CD3gMM>

⁹ ArtEZ Institute of the Arts, Zwolle, The Netherlands

wasn't there anymore, but what still was present. For this I thought about their memory. Their memory was full of holes because of the amnesia that accompanies dementia. But are there not other memories hidden? My conclusion was: there are. They are the memories of the body, the 'embodied memories'. One example are scars. They have a poetical autonomic position. This means that, - the memory of a scar is always present, even if you can't remember or talk about them. They are carved as an embodied memory. Because of this strong fact I thought that this could create an opening to get a conversation with and about them. I started to talk with a group of elderly people about their scars, and suddenly all kinds of stories came to the surface -! One day later, the caretakers decided to try it again because of the strong cognitive stimuli this way of approaching caused. Now one of the caretakers wants to do more research about this way of approaching the elderly people to help them with cognitive problems. My 'artistic reaction' was an audio installation with voices of the elderly people in it, talking about their embodied memories. But even more excited I was about the new point of view I created regarding dementia, the body and memories in general. All of this due to the free space I had to create a creation.

Closure as a new beginning

What do I want to say with all this? I think that every human being has a strong urge to create. To create feelings into ideas, and ideas into palpable reality. For this you need the free space to develop your own interest and connect it to your own urge to create. Then free space to develop will create creation out of his own force and power.

As a Fine Art student I am in this position of free space. But am I really conscious about this? And how do I use this position? Which is one that asks a certain responsibility for my own deeds and its effect on my surroundings. The responsibility for my environment expresses itself in projects like 'embodied memories', but are there not more ways to use this free space? Is there something like an artistic responsibility? Is the world calling for a more (social) interactive connection between the studio of an artist and the outside world? Or is this nonsense? It is a challenge of contemporary art 'an sich' where I can't give any final answers myself. But what I can do is to inspire, with the urge to create, given when I wake up in morning, every day again.

Word of thanks to the apple seed

Some time ago I had a conversation with an apple seed. He told me about his urge to become an apple tree and to create fruits for the earth. For that he asked me to help him and provide the soil to settle, the spirit of water to drink and warmth of the sun to grow. He also told me about his sister the pear seed, which already was a fully grown pear tree and was able to provide everybody around her with sweet pears full of taste. I looked at him and promised to fulfill his wishes. He jumped around like a seed and told me ten times how happy he was to meet me. Then he asked me what kind of tree I was and what kind of fruit I provide to the earth. I told him that I was not a tree but a human being, but he did not understand me. What else can you become than a tree? Every seed has to grow their urge and create fruit!

References

Beuys, Joseph. 'Beuys über Beuys - Ein Gespräch.' beuystv. 30 April 2011. Web. December 2012

Beuys, Joseph. 'Über den erweiterten Kunstbegriff .' beuystv. 19 February 2011. Web. February 2013

Borfdorff, Henk and Peter Sonderen (Eds.). *Denken in kunst: theorie en reflectie in het kunstonderwijs*. The Netherlands: Leiden University Press, 2012

Mackler, Andreas. 1460 Antworten auf die frage: was ist Kunst?. Köln: DuMont Literatur und Kunst Verlag, 2003

Robinson, Ken. 'Schools kill creativity.' TED.com. June 2006. Web. 12 May 2012

Verhaeghe, Paul. *Identiteit*. Belgium: De Bezige Bij, 2012

Verhaeghe, Paul. 'Identiteit' (book presentation). vooruit.be. 19 September 2012. Web. 19 September 2012

Verhaeghe, Paul. 'We Stike Back' Vooruit.be. 1 February 2012. Web. 1 February 2012

Wagenaar, Johan. 'Case studies' Het Instituut. The Netherlands, Founded in 1995