



Denise Ziegler
Features of the Poetic

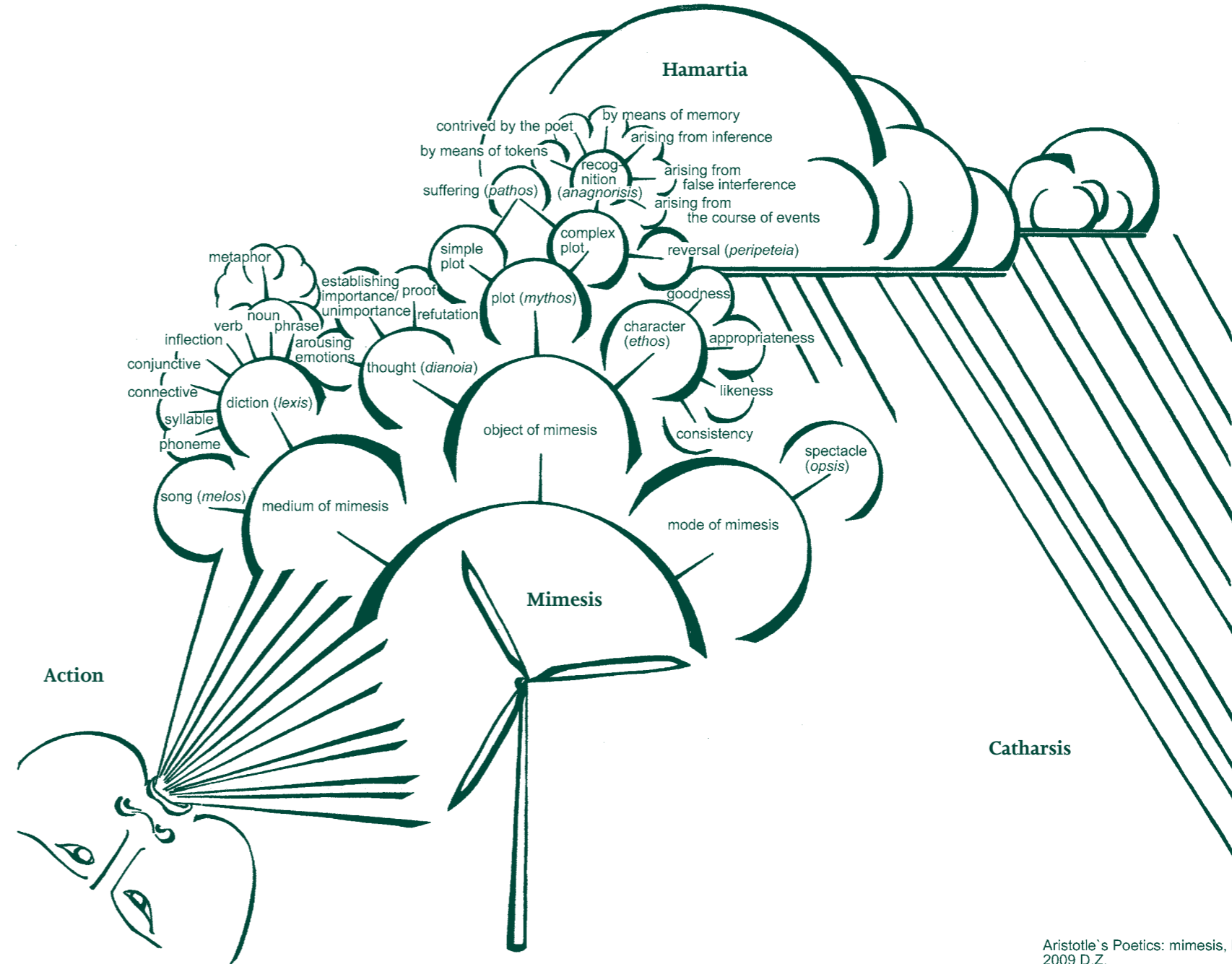
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The starting point of Denise Ziegler's mimetic practice lies in situations that contain some ordinary, unobserved human action that generally goes unnoticed or traces of the same. Ziegler's term for such phenomena is "undefinable gesture", and she analyses their links to poetic expression.

In a dialogue with Aristotle's *Poetics*, Ziegler searches for concrete guidelines for artistic practice, thereby adapting the mechanisms of poetics into her own practice and more broadly into the field of conceptual contemporary art in general. She approaches *Poetics* from her personal perspective, that of a visual artist in Finland in the 21st century – not as an historian or a philosopher.

This volume is the theoretical part of Ziegler's doctoral demonstration of knowledge and skill for the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts. The book is linked to an exhibition held from 6 March – 31 March 2010 at the Kunsthalle in Helsinki.

Denise Ziegler was born in Switzerland in 1965. She has lived in Helsinki since 1990.





Denise Ziegler

Features of the Poetic
The Mimetic Method
of the Visual Artist

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Foreword

The topic of my doctoral demonstration of scholarship and skill concerns features of the poetic in my art. What are the characteristics that make my art poetic? Where does poetic expression originate, and how does it appear in visual art – particularly conceptual visual art?

During my postgraduate studies, I wrote three essays on the poetic. The theme of the first essay was Aristotle's *Poetics*, the second was about the historical development of the concept of mimesis, and the third about the performance of classical tragedy. These three essays make up the backbone of this publication.

I was already interested in the poetic before my postgraduate studies. My Master's thesis for the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, completed in 1995–97, was about the ancient Greek form of poetry known as ekphrastic epigram. Ekphrastic epigrams were used as engraved inscriptions on tombstones or monuments. The starting point of my MFA thesis was the confluence of concepts and images. What I found particularly fascinating was that the development of the epigram was influenced by practical considerations: for instance, they are short due to the small surface on which they are written. The inference is that the epigram and its location mutually influence one another.



Denise Ziegler, *Epigrams for Helsinki Pedestrians*, 1999. Detail of a series of public artworks.

The topic of my doctoral research is also located at the juncture of literature and visual art: I apply the mechanisms of poetics to my own creative work. Poetics – the theory of poetry – is a literary concept that dates all the way back to antiquity, when poetry was perhaps the most important medium of mimetic art.¹ I therefore rely in my research on *Poetics* by Aristotle (384–322 BC), the very theory of art that Western literary theory is based on.²

In this research I discuss *Poetics* – out of an interest arising from my own artistic work – from the perspective of a visual artist. One reason is that Aristotle addressed his work to artists, poets. At the beginning of *Poetics* he observes: "Let us here deal with [...] the way in which plots must be constructed if the poem is to be a success [...]" (1447a 8). In other words, *Poetics* offers us instructions on how to create a poem – a work of art. As an artist, I find the text of *Poetics* appealing in that I search through it for tangible lessons for my artistic practice. I try to understand *Poetics* from my own perspective, that of a visual artist living in Finland in the 21st century. I therefore decided to engage in a dialogue with *Poetics*, a dialogue in which I seek to encounter Aristotle, not as a historian or a student of philosophy, but as a contemporary.

The main emphasis in *Poetics* is on the literary genre of tragic poetry. According to Aristotle, the essence of tragedy is the representation, or mimesis, of human action. In tragedy, mimesis functions through the narrativity of the manuscript, that is, through plot and the description of the characters.³ It is generally accepted that interpretations of *Poetics* have a decided influence on the narrative structure of contemporary moving images, especially television series and narrative cinema. In this study, however, I will try to demonstrate that mimetic representation is not associated exclusively with plot and character. I discuss mimesis as a strategy of representation, one which I apply also to representation in non-narrative contemporary art. By the term 'non-narrative' I refer to presentations of contemporary art in which plot is not the main consideration.

The starting point of my research is my own artistic practice, in which I take mundane, unobtrusive or unintentional situations and turn them into artworks. To take an example: I reconstruct the act of tearing open an envelope by drawing with pencil on paper an enlarged replica of the tear on the top edge of the envelope (drawing series *Törn* [2007]). The tear in the envelope is an indication of how the envelope was opened.⁴ By reconstruction, I refer to the process of turning the original situation – the traces of a mundane, everyday action, as in the example above – into a work of art.

My works are therefore not about people, but about the traces

¹ In ancient Greece, *tekhnē* referred to the 'know-how' required to manufacture artefacts. It was distinct from theoretical knowledge (*epistēmē*). One particular sub-category of *tekhnē* was mimetic arts, which according to Aristotle included "[e]pic poetry, then, and the poetry of tragic drama, and, moreover, comedy and dithyrambic poetry, and most flute-playing and harp-playing [...]" (Aristotle 1932, 1447a. 14–15). — Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from *Poetics* are from the 1932 translation.

² See Sihvola in: Aristoteles 1997, p. 234.

³ See the chapter *Through Aristotle's Poetics to the Visual Artwork of the Undefinable Gesture*, p. 70.

⁴ See p. 70.

they leave. These traces point to an undefinable or unobserved action that has presumably taken place in the situation on which my work is based.⁵ My term for such action is the 'undefinable gesture'.⁶ The aim of my research is to discover the connections between the undefinable gestures in my works and the poetic.

This volume is the theoretical part of my doctoral demonstration of knowledge and skill for the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts. The book is linked to an exhibition⁷ in which I present reconstructions of the traces of undefinable gestures. In this book I discuss the things that I learned in the course of making the works. The research could be seen as an account of my working method, but that is not its primary goal. My aim was rather to clarify and explicate the concept of the undefinable gesture. The idea is for the finished artworks to support the claims made in this book, and vice versa. The supervisors of my doctoral research were Lauri Astala and Tuomas Nevanlinna.

I wish to thank all the people and organisations who have furthered and supported this research: Lauri Astala, Vesa Haapala, Jan Kaila, Katri Maasalo, Mikko Maasalo, Tuomas Nevanlinna, Markus Schwander, the Promotion Centre for Audiovisual Culture AVEK, Frame – Finnish Fund for Art Exchange, the City of Helsinki, the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, the Greta and William Lehtinen Foundation, the Arts Council of Finland, the Arts Council of Helsinki Metropolitan Region, the National Council of Visual Arts, the Promotion Centre for Visual Arts Visek, and the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation.

Helsinki, 10 January 2010 Denise Ziegler

⁵ With the term 'undefinable', I refer to things that are indistinct, volatile, vague, unintentionally yet incontestably ambiguous. 'Undefinable action' refers to action the results of which contain unintentional, aimless, fortuitous aspects (such as the shape of the tear on an envelope). Although undefinable action is always situation-specific, it is not observed in the actual situation, because it is part of everyday routines, the objective of which is elsewhere.

⁶ Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines 'gesture' as "a movement usually of the body or limbs that expresses or emphasizes an idea, sentiment, or attitude" ("He expressed his idea using elegant gestures", "A nod can be an eloquent gesture"). The word can also denote an action that has a purely symbolic meaning ("The roses were a beautiful gesture"). My use of the term 'gesture' derives mainly from the latter meaning, with the gesture being intentional, yet simultaneously small and unobtrusive. Many definitions of 'gesture' also refer to non-verbal communication. I also refer to Roland Barthes' way of using the word 'gesture'. In *Cy Twombly* (Barthes, 1983), he writes that a gesture is that part of an act which tells about the nature of objects (and their users): "What is the nature of trousers (if they have one)? It certainly has no bearing on that flat object neatly folded on a hanger in the department store. The nature of trousers is rather in the pile of clothes dropped carelessly on the floor by an undressing teenager: loose, limp and indifferent. The nature of a garment only becomes apparent when it is undressed: not so much in the pile of cloth after use, but in the very act of casting it off." (Barthes 1983, p. 9).

⁷ Denise Ziegler, 6 March – 31 March 2010, Kunsthalle Helsinki.

1. Introduction

1.1 Awakening as the Starting Point

My works are based on situations that have awakened me in one way or another. Why is my attention drawn to some situations and not to others? What are the situations that awaken in me a sense of wonderment? The reasons for such awakenings are of course many, but I am most drawn to situations that are fortuitous and commonplace. Situations that have served as the starting point for my works often contain poetic features, such as repetition and conciseness, and they also involve elements that can be regarded as signs. The underlying event can also resonate with a personal memory.

I am awakened by the relationship between a place and the event unfolding in it: my observation of what the place is used for or its atmosphere. My interest focuses on spatially located human activity and its site-specificity in particular. The term I use here is 'action-specific site'.⁸ One of the focal points of my work is the action-specificity of sites from the viewpoint of human action.

Below, one by one, I will present factors which have occasioned such awakenings in me. These include fortuitousness and ordinariness, mentioned above; features of the poetic, action-specificity, sign-likeness, as well as wonderment, memory and the instruments of recall. I will discuss the ways in which I employ these factors in this research, and their relationship to my artistic practice.

1.1.1 Fortuitousness and Ordinariness

I believe that wondering at situations that awaken us is a universal characteristic, and, like many other artists, I use such situations as the starting point for my work. Someone may experience this kind of awakening at the scene of an accident or a natural phenomenon. For me, such situations typically involve actions which are generally repetitive and ordinary, and by virtue of their ordinariness are unnoticed or fortuitous. It is in the context of these situations that I speak of undefinable gestures. A case in point would be the following chain of events: a shoelace comes undone while a person walks in the street; the person bends down and reties the lace. A shoelace usually comes undone unnoticed, and the actual place where it happens cannot be predicted with any certainty. While the shoelace is being retied, it may suddenly snap, and the end of the shoelace is left lying in the street. Pieces of shoelaces found on the ground indicate that this situation is a recurring one. It is my contention that the appearance of a piece of broken shoelace in the street is a trace of an undefinable gesture, because it points to the presumed events mentioned above.⁹

⁸ Action-specific is a term coined by me on the basis of the term site-specific. Whereas site-specific places the emphasis on the location of the artwork, action-specific draws attention to the event.

⁹ In the chapter *Nineteen Situations* I discuss situations that shed light in different ways on the concept of the undefinable gesture (pp. 21–59).

1.1.2 Poetic Expression and Action-Specificity

One thing shared by situations that involve an undefinable gesture and by the principle of poetic expression is that both can express a human action that is devoid of any pragmatic benefit as regards the communication of information. The principal outcome of such action is confusion, although it can also clarify a matter. One essential aspect of the poetic is that it contains – and even embraces – conflicting situations.¹⁰ It balances between two positions: explanation and intuitive understanding.¹¹

My hypothesis is that the undefinable gesture is an essential component or indicator of the principle of poetic expression. Other possible components of the poetic include the reversal or turning point (*peripeteia*) and repetition, a part of diction (*lexis*).

The undefinable gesture is particularly interesting, because its traces seem to mediate between visuality (or physical perception on a more general level) and conceptuality. In my research I explore this mediating position of the undefinable gesture, applying the principles of poetic expression above all to my own artistic practice, but also to other action-specific or mimetic contemporary art.¹²

1.1.3 Sign-likeness and Wonder

In my research, I discuss many objects that are like signs, as well as the sign systems they constitute, which open up to me through the sense of wonder. My approach to such sign-likenesses is mimetic¹³ rather than semiotic.¹⁴ Objects and sign-likeness engage my interest in relation to the poetic events as a result of which they have come into existence. Such events are often unresolvable or inexplicable, which is the very reason I find them fascinating. The discovery of such signlike objects is accidental; no advance reactions or measures are necessary. The fortuitousness of an object can be noticed or unnoticed, it can evoke wonder or not.¹⁵

In selecting events as the basis for my work, I implicitly trust the experience they elicit in me. The intensity of such an awakening or wonderment is thus one criterion for whether I begin to create a piece or not.

An opposite to the signlike objects arising from undefinable gestures are conventional everyday signs, such as street signs, letters, logos or religious symbols. The nature of these signs is unsurprising, they are perfectly predictable and understandable. Often they contain an exhortative, warning, confirmatory or educational element. Such signs are not part of the present research.

10 “[...] a convincing impossibility is preferable to that which is unconvincing though possible.” (Aristotle 1932, 1461b 11–13).

11 I discuss these questions in the chapter *Representation of the Undefinable Gesture* (p. 78–).

12 My principal source is Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the structure of which is presented in the Appendix (p. 96–).

13 My own artistic process is mimetic, as is the starting point of the method described in the chapter *Nineteen Situations* (p. 18).

14 Semiotics is the science of signs and the formation of meaning.

15 The traces of action I reconstruct in my works could be described as confluences of the symbolic and the physical. They are ambiguous with respect to whether they are cultural signs or physical traces.

1.1.4 Memory and the Instrument of Recall

The mind’s associative capacity often links seen and lived situations to memories of similar situations that have occurred previously. One may suddenly recall earlier thoughts, ideas or spatial experiences that become seamlessly associated with the new situation.

In an awakening, the linearity of time does not always seem applicable, so I process things that have happened at other times. A situation encountered in the present may thus evoke a very powerful experience in me.¹⁶

I document the situations that impress me like this in a suitable medium. Most often I take a photograph, in addition to which I sometimes make notes about the size and material of objects in the situation. Sometimes I begin to create a work as soon as I have amassed the documentation; at other times I make nothing at all. Sometimes a long period may pass before I begin to make a piece on the basis of my notes. The most important function of the notes is to recall both the situation that awakened my interest and the associated experience.¹⁷ The event of recollection itself can give rise to surprising, awakening experiences, which I then exploit in the making of the piece. The taking of notes – the act of recording – is a daily tool for me. The relationship between my memory and the finished piece is very personal. The outward appearance of the piece does not seek to be a memorial or monument; its intended function is to awaken experiences through recollection.

In what follows, I will discuss some of the key aspects in the communication of the undefinable gesture and the experiences elicited by it.

1.2 Situational Residue

The greatest challenge in my work is to find ways to represent the undefinable gesture with greater accuracy. I want the work to retain the essential qualities (unpredictability, fortuitousness) of the original situation in spite of their being expressed as representations. In the reconstructions, I recreate the selected undefinable gestures and their traces as faithfully as possible and then recontextualise them. The reconstructions are usually three-dimensional object combinations, but they can also be drawings or – as in the Istanbul lecture presented herein – literary-cum-visual works.

In processing situations into artworks, there are two things I consider important, both of which have to do with the concept of residue in different senses of the word. By the term residue I mean that which was part of the original situation, but which was left out of the finished artwork.

16 I will not dwell further on recollection as an element in awakening (but see my text Ziegler 1999).

17 The writer Paavo Haavikko knows that an idea can be ruined by excessively detailed notes: “Topics he had intended to write about, there was already a folder full of them. The notes must not be too precise, the thought must not be expressed, because then it would be forgotten; merely the kind of notes saying you remember a little, something about it. [...] the next list is more difficult to date, it might be from the early Sixties, judging by the stage of my longhand. I will give the list without any comment: food lift, man from Jyväskylä, the most beautiful flower in St Petersburg, Kauppinen, Interrogation, trip to St Petersburg, Farmhouse...” (Haavikko 1987: p. 73–74)

a) The reconstructed situation – the artwork – contains, in the form of representations, all the essential physical elements that occasioned the awakening in the original situation. Yet there are always some details missing from the reconstruction – the reductive nature of the reconstruction functions as a kind of sign for the residue. It also provides clues for the viewers' imagination.

b) The appearance of a piece of shoelace in the street, as I discussed in the example above, is accidental in relation to the place where it happens. How can such unintentionality and accidentality be expressed in an exhibition, where everything is carefully planned? Is it possible at all to represent something that is fortuitous? In making the work about the snapping of a shoelace, I painted a picture of the broken-off section of the shoelace more than two hundred times on canvases the size of an A4 typing sheet, and strung them up in the gallery at eye level. I selected a gallery where the entry from one room to the next is from the corner, with the layout of two rooms resembling the figure 8, giving the installation of broken shoelaces the shape of the sign of infinity. In the show, the string of paintings was 'infinite', whereas the piece of shoelace depicted in its constituent parts was broken.¹⁸

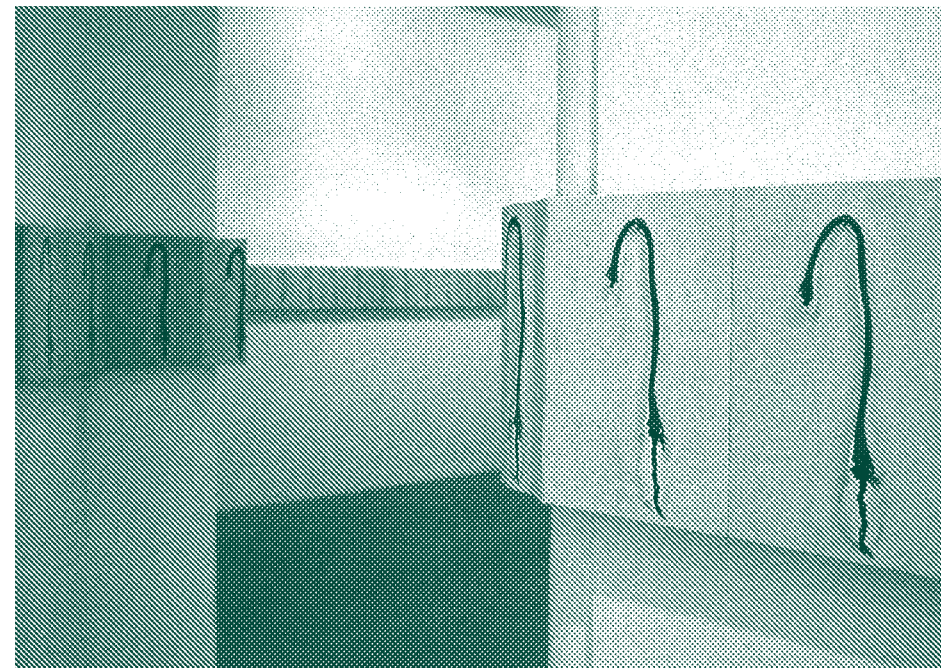
A fortuitous situation reconstructed into an artwork is – as I have pointed out – always an intentional gesture relative to the exhibition venue. The reconstruction of an undefinable gesture therefore has certain conflicting aspects. The conflict arises from the difference between two gestures: the fortuitous gesture in the original situation, and the intentional gesture in the exhibition space. My term for this difference is the (positive) residue, or intrinsic gesture, of the work. The aim in the shoelace piece was to represent fortuitousness through the contrast between the motif (broken shoelace) and the hanging of it (sign of infinity).¹⁹

The undefinable gesture in my finished works can be conflicting or poetic, but also comical or tautological.

More often than not, my works do not represent the undefinable gestures themselves, but their traces. This gives rise to the issue of imitation or mimesis in the reconstruction. How faithfully should the original situation be reflected in the reconstruction? Is it possible that, by altering some details, the reconstruction might appear more real than the original? If so, can a methodology be constructed for such reconstruction? What is the required degree of exactitude? How much inventiveness and creativity is allowed or desirable?

¹⁸ Solo exhibition *Fil rouge*, 1995

¹⁹ I will discuss conflict in the chapter *Representation of the Undefinable Gesture* (p. 78–).



Denise Ziegler, *Fil rouge*, 1995. Painting installation, TMgalleria, Helsinki.

1.3 Uses of the Concept of Mimesis

The four chapters in this volume illuminate different aspects of the concept of the undefinable gesture: its starting points, its reconstruction as a work of art (its mimeticity), its expressive power, and its links to poetry.

I also seek to reclaim for the concept its original multiplicity of meaning,²⁰ and reintroduce it in the context of contemporary art. I analyse mimesis by emphasising different meanings of the term in each of the four chapters. I also anchor them to examples of my work, and more generally to phenomena in the visual arts. I do this as follows:

In the chapter *Nineteen situations*, I discuss mimesis in relation to my working method, analysing the mimetic method I have developed, which I call 'mimetic reiteration'.²¹ In the chapter, I present 19 situations where the undefinable gesture appears either as itself or as a reference to the conditions of its appearance (p. 21).

In *Mimesis of Imagination*, I discuss mimesis as an activity that

²⁰ See e.g. p. 18.

²¹ Mimetic reiteration refers to a repetitive and reiterative mimetic process. For example, I take the documentary photographs of situations which I use as sketches and transpose them into mimetic texts, and some of those texts I process into three-dimensional works; in other words, I reinterpret them mimetically (see chapter *Nineteen Situations*, p. 19).

expresses creative imagination. My examples in the chapter are *The Charge of the Spider Plants*, 2004 (p. 65–68), *Autumn Conference of Christmas Cactuses*, 2001 (p. 65–68) and *Sound Drawings*, 1996–2001 (p. 68). More generally, I discuss seriality in art and transient artworks. In this chapter, I seek to integrate mimesis into the theory of contemporary art (p. 65–68).

In the chapter entitled *Through Aristotle's Poetics to an Artwork of Undefinable Gesture*, I discuss mimesis as complete representation of human action. The works I use as examples in this chapter are the series of drawings entitled *Torn*, 2007, the series of painting entitled *There, There Not*, 2003 (p. 70–71) and the sketch for the film *Language* (p. 77). The subject matter of the works discussed in the chapter involves unintentionality, ordinariness and fortuitousness.

The chapter poses the question of how action can be transformed into works of art (p. 71). Aristotle's *Poetics* is a source of information on mimesis, that is, instructions on how action should be represented.

In this chapter, I apply the key ideas from *Poetics* to my own work, discussing unintentional and undefinable human actions as mimetic gestures (p. 75). As a counterpoint to the undefinable gesture, I propose the concept of a fruitful moment of human activity²², characterising the works created on that basis as un-mimetic (p. 74). My claim in the chapter is that the undefinable human gesture is one of the indicators of the poetic (p. 77).

In *Representation of the Undefinable Gesture*, I discuss mimesis as an interpretation of human action. The works used as examples are *Olo no. 22* by the Olo group (2000, p. 82–84), *Built Up* by Sampo Malin (2007, p. 84–86) and my own *Once a Week, for a Year* (2008, p. 87–89). All these conceptual works contain some mimetic features. The chapter examines the representational quality of the undefinable gesture and shows that mimetic representation is invariably based on the representation of conflicting and paradoxical situations. Conflict and paradox are also shown to be essential aspects of the undefinable gesture.

Aristotle posits Oedipus as the paragon of tragedy and mimesis. In the chapter, I also discuss the view of the French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe regarding Oedipus as a conflictual and philosophical figure.

1.4 Appendix

In the Appendix, I present a summary of Aristotle's *Poetics* (p. 96–99). My primary focus is on what Aristotle says about the concepts that are crucial to my research. Aristotle weaves his poetics around

three main concepts: mimesis, hamartia and catharsis. Together these three concepts constitute the conceptual schematic for human action. While writing the summary of *Poetics*, I drew a visual presentation of its content (reproduced inside the back cover). The summary and the scheme both served as materials when I was preparing the theoretical part of my research.

The purpose of the summary and the drawing is also to show how and why the scheme of *Poetics* (mimesis, hamartia and catharsis) is applicable to visual art.

²² By the term 'fruitful moment' I refer to moments of action, depicted in the work, which refer both to preceding and subsequent time; my interest is not on works of the fruitful moment, but on works where an action is represented in its totality. A kindred concept is the 'decisive moment' of Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908–2004). Unlike the fruitful moment, the decisive moment refers not only to the culmination of the action, but above all to compositional principles for the geometry and spatiality in the picture. Henri Cartier-Bresson writes: "To take a photograph means to recognize – simultaneously and within a fraction of a second – both the fact itself and the rigorous organisation of visually perceived forms that give it meaning." (website of Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson)

2. Nineteen Situations

2.1 What Mimesis?

I became interested in mimesis for the simple reason that there are mimetic elements in my own practice. I began reading up on mimesis, which in the contemporary art scene is mostly regarded as an undesirable, uncreative characteristic. The reason for this is the general idea of mimesis as mere imitation or copying.

Mimesis comes from the Greek, and its translation into other languages has had many consequences: most often, mimesis is understood and translated as imitation (Latin *imitari*, to imitate), including the imitation of nature.²³ Ancient philosophers and writers used the concept to describe a practice in art, but their primary object of interest was not imitation. According to Oiva Kuisma²⁴, "mimesis is a relational term that says something about the relationships between objects of art and the models they are based on" (Kuisma 1991, Introduction).

In this research, mimesis includes not only a transfer from one language to another, but also the transfer from one material or medium to another, from plan to realisation, and from original to copy. In other words, mimesis describes the process of translation. I discuss mimesis from several different viewpoints, because my purpose is to reclaim for mimesis its original multiplicity of meanings.

2.2 The Multiple Meanings of Mimesis

The term of mimesis appears today in all kinds of contexts. One such context was the antique sculptures from the Ludwig Collection exhibited in the Wilhelmshöhe castle in Kassel in 2002, and the associated leaflet. Among other things, the leaflet contained a written and visual presentation of the marble torso of a girl (Gercke 1994, p. 245). Four black-and-white photographs on the same page show the torso from different perspectives: front, sides and back. The pictures are matter-of-fact, archival. The text beside them first enumerates facts about the sculpture, such as its dimensions, material, condition and the missing parts of the torso. Then follows a detailed description:

"The head, together with the neck, and the right arm from the shoulder, already separated and anchored in ancient times (a fragment of the corroded metal plug still remains), are broken-off and lost. The right shoulder and mantle hem show the signs of having been slightly knocked..."

²³ For recent research which goes back to the texts of Plato and Aristotle for a closer definition of the concept of mimesis, see e.g. Kuisma 1991, Petersen 2000, Halliwell 2002 and Lacoue-Labarthe 1986/2003.

²⁴ Oiva Kuisma, Ph.D., lecturer at the Department of Aesthetics at University of Helsinki.

Presented in a relaxed standing-striding motif, the girl is tightly wrapped in her robes and opens up to the free leg side, with an arm extended freely from her body. The left standing leg remains hidden behind the regular folds of rounded rims and hollows; merely the toe of her shoe with a high sole becomes evident on the edge of the plinth and is overlaid with bent folds. The raised arm which has been lost could have been supporting, conceivably resting her head on her hand. [...] Without showing the chiton beneath it, the robe seems to be made from a heavier fabric and is presented continuously in waving shallow folds. (Gercke 1994, p. 245–246)

The description is so precise that I return to the photographs to check details that I had missed when I first looked at them. On the other hand, the text speculates about the missing parts of the work, and presents a possible picture of the piece at the time of its completion. Would it be possible to say that the text mimics the sculpture? Which one has a closer relationship to the sculpture, the text or the photographs? How would the text work without the pictures?²⁵ What is the relationship of the text and the images to the sculpture of a girl's torso deposited in the cellar of the museum, or to one in a display case? Such questions are part and parcel of the problematics of mimesis.

2.3 Mimetic Reiteration

As I mentioned in the introduction, my works are based on situations that have jolted me personally into awareness. The documentary photographs taken of the situations serve as sketches from among which I select the ones I then process into artworks. In the process of selection I use a method that contains certain mimetic elements.

The method is based on 'transposing' the documentary photographs into text. I then read the texts and decide which situations I want to process further into three-dimensional works. My term for this process is 'mimetic reiteration', which is intended to convey the idea of repeated mimetic processing. The purpose of mimetic reiteration is to distance the situations from personal experience and thereby to facilitate the selection process.

I will give examples of mimetic reiteration in the Istanbul lecture²⁶ (p. 21–59), in which I discuss 19 public situations using both documentary photographs and descriptive texts for each situation. Each individual picture also has a comment on the prevailing conditions when the photograph was taken.²⁷

²⁵ A graphic description of a work of art is known as ekphrasis.

²⁶ The sub-chapter on the presentation of situations is based on the lecture I gave on 17 September 2005 at a symposium on artistic research in Istanbul. The topic of the lecture was *The Language of the Vague Gesture*. As individual photographs, the situations described in the Istanbul lecture (p. 21–59) are not artworks, but material on the basis of which I create my works.

²⁷ I studied each picture and wrote down the details, such as what could be seen on the right or left-hand side of the picture or in the upper or lower half. Sometimes closer examination revealed details I had missed when I was taking the picture. Things could be recorded in the photograph about the situation that I had forgotten. The texts describing these photographs are written in the present tense. I also used my recollections of the shooting situation. Because I had been personally present in all of them, I was able to remember things that do not appear in the photographs. Background information about the site or about the moment the photograph was taken are given under the description. This additional information is written in the past tense.

The common denominator of these situations is that, when I came across them, I had a sudden, revelatory experience. They involved something strange, undefinable or inexplicable, or, alternatively, traces in these situations pointed to such a thing. My term for the action involved in these situations is 'undefinable gesture' and the traces pointing to such gestures, 'traces of an undefinable gesture'. The Istanbul lecture is a more extensive mapping of the sites and situations where undefinable gestures have appeared to me.

In looking at the photographs and transposing them into text, my purpose is to spend time with the chosen situations and to discover what the undefinable gesture in them is, where it appears, and how it functions. The undefinable gesture is an action that is spatial and concrete, but also symbolic, occurring on a mental level. More often than not, it leaves behind a signlike trace or message, the code of which can only be deciphered when one takes into account the circumstances and the setting.

Signs of an undefinable gesture can typically be found in accidental meetings between people or in instinctual behaviour (p. 37 and 41). An undefinable gesture can be discovered in a personal interpretation (p. 45) or in the sense of relief brought on by the explanation for an otherwise mysterious phenomenon (p. 47). It can also be found in the moment when the senses are misled or an illusion is broken by a work of art (p. 48–55).

The main point of the Istanbul lecture is that it sheds light on the undefinable gesture from different angles. The situations mentioned above only point to attitudes or preconditions which enable the actualisation of the undefinable gesture or its trace. Through these situations, I was able to discover something about the nature of the undefinable gesture, even though I have not felt compelled to turn the gestures into works of art.

With respect to my practice, the objective of the Istanbul lecture was to filter for processing (reconstruction) the situation or situations in which the undefinable gesture or its trace appears at its most direct. After presenting the Istanbul lecture, I will provide examples of situations to be worked into art.



The bare rock face of the mountainside has been worn smooth by the Ice Age. In the reflection of the evening light, its surface is wet and blue-grey. In the upper part of the picture, the old ice is packed and coloured grey by gravel. At left, a thin, milky, bluish-white glacial brook gushes down into the grooves of the rock.



A landscape of snow-capped mountains, with a blue-green mountain lake in the foreground. There is some small movement on the surface of the water, the landscape around the lake is reflected in it out of focus. In the foreground to the right, a rocky cliff plunges into the lake, with a few scrawny pines clinging to it. At left, a bit further off, the mountainside is lit from the back. Like a dark claw, it descends into the lake. On the highest point of the mountainside, a white field of snow is seen. At the back of the photograph, an entire mountain range is visible, with sharp tops. The lower part of the mountainside is bare, the upper part is covered in snow. Snow clings to everything except the steepest sides of the jagged tops. The sky is dark blue, a wisp of cloud spreads over the lake. A white bank of clouds is rising from behind the tallest peaks.

The power of the Alpine landscape stuns and also calms me. I can stay there doing nothing, just enjoying the view and letting time slip away. In the city, I am restless and my thoughts are highly strung. That is the reason I work in the city. When I walk or ride a bicycle in the city, my attention is drawn to situations that are almost unnoticeable, fleeting or unintentional. The events associated with such situations can be repetitive, but also unique. On the following pages, I will present a few such situations.

By the side of a dirt road is a sturdy log fence. The fence has been repaired by replacing five of the horizontal rails. The pale surface of the new wood is clearly distinguished from the otherwise patinated fence. The work was done on site, or at least finished here. There are fresh chips of wood on the road next to the posts.

The fence has been repaired a short while ago. Had I arrived fifteen minutes earlier, I might have been able to see the workmen finishing their job. I was struck by the sense of just-finished work in the place. The 'just finished' atmosphere began the moment the repairs on the fence had been finished, the tools had been cleared away and the workmen's footsteps had finished crunching of the gravel. The moment would pass soon, because birds and the wind were already taking away the first woodchips. Later on, the intense yellow colour of the freshly worked-on wood will gradually begin to patinate into grey. The moment was unique and therefore meaningful.



Around a slender newly planted tree, three round wooden stakes are stuck into the ground at a distance of about half a metre. The stakes slant slightly outwards from the tree. A wire is attached to the upper end of each stake. The wires are tied around the trunk of the tree. They are sheathed in green plastic tubing where they touch the growing tree.



The situation had arisen from very practical demands: a newly planted tree needing support. The construction supported the tree by pulling it in three different directions. The situation had the appearance of immobility, yet it was charged with power. In the centre of the three horizontal wires pulling it in different directions, the tree was slowly growing straight up. There was also another interesting point: the trunk of the tree and the three supporting stakes were all very nearly the same diameter. Here, timber had been pressed to service to support a living tree. In a garden, we determine, or at least try to influence, which plants may live and which ones die.

A fine example of the variety of attitudes people can have to trees (as natural beings, as cultivated plants, as material for construction or heating, etc.) can be found in the novel *The Way of a Man* by the Finnish author F. E. Sillanpää. In the book, Sillanpää describes a thinning stand of trees that makes way for human dwellings. He describes an apple orchard surrounded by a wooden fence, and a primitive dwelling with its wooden window frames and roof shingles. The description of the house ends with a mention of the chimney and its smoke, which points to the use of wood for heating. The attitude of people to wood or plants generally ranges from care to exploitation, without us ever paying attention to it, or ascribing ethical values to it. (Sillanpää 1932, p. 260.)

The exercise of power in a garden is a gesture that remains unnoticed, because it is considered so self-evident.



A tree grows from the pavement near the traffic lane. It is surrounded by an area of about 1.5 square metres, which is bordered by a low iron fence painted black. Reddish-blue tulips and blue lilies have begun to bloom in the area.



A tree growing on the edge of the pavement is surrounded by an area bordered by a low black iron border fence. The bordered area is untended, there are some weeds growing at the foot of the tree, and a few dry twigs of ivy hang through the border.

A similar situation to above. The railing is made of U-shaped iron bars, tied together, with the prongs pointing downwards. There are two overlapping rows of these bars, with the next bar rising up from the bent centre of the previous one. The bordered area is full of red tulips. The stems of the flowers facing the traffic lane are slightly shorter, those on the side of the pavement rise clearly above the border.

These observations (p. 30–33) are from pavements in New York City in spring 2000. The same situation repeated from one street to the next: a small fenced-in area at the foot of a tree growing along the street. The materials and shapes of the borders varied, the plantings had been devised and tended in different ways. There were streets where the plantings were all the same. A stick had been pushed into the soil in one of these areas, with a note pinned to it. The note said that the flowers were tended by the children living in the adjacent house. It appeared as if the maintenance of these green areas were always the responsibility of the house next to them. I found it interesting to try to match the flowerbeds with the houses nearby and to speculate who lived in or visited these houses. The flowerbeds were almost like windowsills for the houses: they said something about the tenants of the house, or at least about the maintenance company hired by them. It was similar to the way a passer-by can learn about the inhabitants of individual dwellings by studying the flowers and potted plants on their sills. The plants were a message saying ‘people live here’, ‘there is someone home’. They were fairly inconspicuous, yet very clear gestures.



Placing potted plants on a windowsill is also an undefinable gesture.



A low steel fence surrounds the trunk of a tree growing at the edge of the pavement. The fenced-in area is square, and it contains soil and a few dry leaves. The fence is made of curved black steel bars pointing downwards. These U-shaped curved bars overlap so that each bar starts at a point where one third of the previous curve is still left. On each side of the fence are four oval decorations made of black steel. The ovals are about ten centimetres across, and they are split down the middle. The decorations are affixed to the fence at regular intervals.

At first glance, the odd shape of the ornaments made me think of hoof prints. When I walked past, I suddenly felt the smell of freshly ground coffee. Next to the bordered area was a small shop selling coffee beans. The stylised metal decorations on the fence actually depicted large coffee beans. The mystery of the decorations was solved by the smell. The minimalistic coffee bean ornaments represented a marked departure from the common way of advertising products and services in New York, with gigantic illuminated billboards and flashing advertisements.

The smell of fresh coffee becomes linked to a strange visual phenomenon.

Between two sturdy old houses is a short street ending in a wide, steep staircase. In the foreground is a pedestrian crossing, and at its left-hand end, a black car, parked half on the pavement. The foreground of the image – the pavement and the car – as well as the façade of the house at left are bathed in bright sunlight. The house on the right casts an oblique shadow onto the farther end of the street, covering the stairs almost completely. A large number of people are crowded into the building's shadow. Many are sitting or lying down, and many are wearing a sun hat. A few people stand on the street near the border between light and shadow. One of them carries a backpack. He is walking towards the stairs.

The situation was recorded in the centre of Rome near the Forum Romanum. In summer 2000, Pope John Paul II had invited two million young people to celebrate the great Christian Jubilee. The temperature in the streets of Rome that August rose to 35 degrees Celsius. The Romans had, as is their custom, escaped the heat to the shore or the mountains. The empty, fiery city and its shadows in particular were filled with a greater number of tourists than usual. Many of them were unaccustomed to the heat, and the organisers had distributed water bottles and white sun hats to the young pilgrims. If one were to remove the shadow from the photograph, you could still clearly tell where the line between the sun and the shadow went. The people seeking refuge from the sun filled every square metre that was in shadow. In this situation, the shadow acquired a physical dimension: the people in the photograph collectively comprised a kind of 'shadow'. They represented the idea of shadow simply through their own need for shade. The image of the shade drawn by the mass of people did not exist for very long. An hour after the photograph was taken, with the movement of the Earth, the stairs were bathed entirely in sunlight, and the people had gone to seek shadow elsewhere. Gatherings such as these are an accidental, random feature in a city. A similar thing can happen in a downpour, when people without umbrellas run to the nearest awning to wait for the rain to end among strangers.



Random gatherings in an urban space can also contain an undefinable gesture.

The street is paved with large, rough-hewn stone flags. In the centre of the photograph, there is a pile of white fluffy material. The wind lifts up about half of the material, starting from the left. The moving fluff builds a rapidly spinning whirl, the centre of which is empty. The movement appears in the picture as soft white streaks. Looking at the material remaining on the ground, one can see that it consists of small seeds surrounded by a fluffy, cottony material. At the left-hand side of the picture is a part of another fluffy pile. A somewhat elongated pile of the same material is at left farther back.

The picture has to do with an annually recurring event. Towards the end of the summer, certain places in the centre of Helsinki (such as the front of Hotel Presidentti on Eteläinen Rautatiekatu street, or the entrance to the Swimming Stadium) become filled with the white seeds of the willow tree, floating in the air and piling up on the ground. The material is as light as a feather, and the faintest current of air can lift up the piles and turn them into graceful whirls. This summer 'snowfall' surprises me every year. When I was taking this photograph, I reproached myself for having once again forgotten it. The fluffy 'rain' differs from other autumnal occurrences in that fall leaves will change colour in all green areas. The rain of willow seeds, by contrast, is a local phenomenon: it only occurs in places where certain trees grow, and it only lasts a very short time. Those who do not happen to be in the right place at the right time, miss the phenomenon. The next time it rains, the cottony fluff will be crushed and swept away.



There are natural phenomena to wonder at even in the urban environment.

The open square in the picture is half-empty. At the back of the square is a long building, of which you can see the two lower storeys. At left, the building abuts at right angles to a low one-storey building. The strip of windows running along the length of the latter building have yellowish advertising lights above and below the windows. The back half of the square is filled by sixteen people standing at approximately three metres from one another. They are all looking in the same direction, away from the low building. Many of them are standing with their legs slightly apart, in classical contrapposto. The man furthest to the right is looking down. The tip of his left foot is slightly raised. It is likely that he is just shifting his weight onto his left leg. The people are dressed warmly, yet they are not wearing hats. Some carry a bag. A woman in a long red overcoat has set down two light-coloured plastic carrier bags in front of her.

The people in the picture are at the Helsinki railway station waiting for a train from Turku. The surprising thing in the situation is how loosely these sixteen people have spread out over a fairly large area. I tried to think how the situation had come about: the first person had stopped somewhere, the next one had stopped at a suitable distance, and so on. Choosing the place to wait, the people may even have considered that all the others should also have a view of the platform. The configuration is both conscious and accidental. No one arranged it; everyone who arrived there quite naturally chose a suitable spot.



Unconscious, instinctive action can lead to an undefinable gesture.

There is a rounded recess in a stone wall about one and a half metres from the floor. The recess is half a metre wide and one and a half metres tall, and the surrounding wall is decorated with elements resembling pillars. At the spot where the arch begins at the top of the recess, the pillars end in stucco decorations that imitate heavy drapery, decorative wreaths with fruit and pine cones. In the recess stands a large stone vase, and in the vase is an impressive flower arrangement that fills the entire recess. The generous bouquet consists of largish red flowers and smaller white flowers growing in slender clusters. The arrangement is finished with pale green and thick dark green leaves as filigree. Under the recess, there is stone pedestal that protrudes slightly from the wall. At the top of the pedestal a small metal plaque has been affixed, with the following text engraved on it. "THESE FRESH FLOWERS ARE / THE CONTINUING GIFT OF / ULA ACHESON WALLACE."²⁸ The recess is lit with spotlights, the flowers cast shadows onto the adjacent walls.

I encountered this situation in the spacious entrance hall of the New York Metropolitan Museum. I was drawn to the large, impressive bouquet because I wanted to know what the plaque underneath said. The text on the plaque functions like an ekphrastic epigram: it provides information about the artwork that is not readily apparent in the work itself. The floral arrangement was not a work of art, however. The text on the plaque clearly indicated that this was a strange idea bequeathed to the museum by a certain lady. The bequest of flowers supported the idea of the museum, yet had no direct link to its operation. The cut flowers offered as a gift were a gesture that represented the message it was intended to convey. Without roots, the flowers would soon wilt. They were more like messengers than a material gift. The fascinating and conflicting nature of the cut flowers, somewhere between materialism and symbolism, was emphasised by the fact that the arrangement has to be continuously replaced. The floral arrangement in the Metropolitan Museum communicates again and again the deceased lady's positive attitude towards the museum. The donation also had an effect on the museum's vicinity: a florist somewhere near the museum was probably pleased by the standing order.

The attitude with which the eternal gift of fresh flowers was made contained features of an undefinable gesture.

²⁸ Lila Acheson Wallace (1889–1984), known among other things as the founder of Reader's Digest.



Pictured against the blue sky, a sign reads PIAZZA DONATORI DI SANGUE (Piazza of Blood Donors). The text is engraved into a thin stone slab, the letters coloured red. The stone plaque is framed in a simple, rusting steel frame. The frame has no top edge, allowing the stone slab to be inserted into the frame from above. The frame is welded onto a square pole made of the same rusting steel as the frame. At the lower right-hand side of the picture we can see branches of what is probably a fir tree or a larch. Up on the left-hand side we can see two pine branches some distance apart. There is more green vegetation visible at the bottom of the picture.

The sign in the piazza called my attention with its robust and heavy, yet simple appearance. The functionality of the sign drew me to read the engraved text, 'Piazza donatori di sangue'. I wondered at the name. Was there perhaps a Red Cross blood donation point somewhere near? I donate blood regularly, and this was the first thought that came to my mind. Then I noticed a church in the park-like environs of the square, and thought: 'Of course, it's about bloodshed in wartime.' I noticed how much my assessment of the situation was coloured by my personal circumstances. I grew up in Switzerland, where there are no graves or monuments to soldiers killed in the war (or at least I have never seen any).



The personal interpretation projected onto a situation may contain an undefinable gesture.

A pavement on the right-hand side of the street. In the distance, a woman pushing a pram with a red hood is coming towards the camera. A man with dark hair walks beside her. There is no one in the foreground. Two stone steps rise from the pavement on the right. A metal peg is mounted on the topmost stair. It is the stopper of the dark wooden door leading to a shop. On the window in the door there are bars, painted white. Farther off, similar entrances can be seen, with large display windows in between. Above the ground-floor businesses there are protruding bay windows, grouped in pairs at a certain distance from each other. The first two bays are rounded, the next one is angular. The bay windows create a small overhang. On the pavement in front of the first pair of bay windows there is a long, curving band of ice. The narrow band in the middle of the pavement clearly replicates the curving shape of the first-floor bay windows of the house.

Water had dripped to the ground from the curving bay windows of the Art Nouveau building. The sun had apparently melted the snow that had clung to the stucco wall, or the gutter was blocked and the melting snow had trickled down from the roof over the wall. The pavement was cold because in the winter the sun does not reach it. The water dripping from the wall had frozen and created a strange double arc. Looking at the picture, the connection between the arc of ice and the architecture of the house is obvious, because all the elements of the picture are there at the same time. When I was walking along the street, looking down, I first noticed the arc, but could not remember what kind of building was there. In other words, I did not discover immediately the explanation for the arc. I walked past it, and only when I turned my head and looked up did the odd sign become a part of a natural weather phenomenon. In a city, one comes across numerous sign systems (warning signs, traffic signs, signage). Finding a natural explanation for the double arc I had taken for a sign was a relief: the twin arcs of ice carried no particular meaning. It was 'merely' the result of the random cooperation between architecture and weather conditions. The relief brought on by the disappearance of the strangeness, the sign-likeness of the ice, was an undefinable gesture.



A strange sign appears in the street.

A small two-storey tower-like building stands on a slope in a park-like setting. The corners of the house, the window frames, the narrow strip between the floors, the stone plinth and the cornice are of bare gray stone, otherwise the house is plastered white. There are two windows on each side of the house, one on every floor. The downstairs windows are small holes, the upstairs windows are bigger. None of the windows appears to be glazed. The roof is probably flat. Two people are approaching the house along the road at the bottom edge of the picture. The house is markedly leaning towards the slope.

This situation is from the village of Bomarzo in Italy, 68 km north of Rome. It was part of a Park of Monsters that Prince Orsini built in 1552 to entertain his guests. There were numerous stone sculptures in the park that depicted fantastical creatures: a gigantic elephant that carried a tower on its back, an enormous head whose mouth was the entrance to a cave containing a table and a bench, a giant who had literally torn his adversaries in two, and so on. The sculptors had not paid too much attention to anatomy. The main objective was probably to create an impressive and horrifying effect. Today, the features of these figures, softened by time, seem a bit clumsy, and the monsters' expressions mostly elicit sympathy. The monsters of Bomarzo were in a ruined old amusement park. One thing in the park had lost none of its functionality over the centuries: the house described above, which was deliberately constructed at an angle. One got the impression that it was sinking diagonally into the ground. A dirt road along the slope passed the house. There was a small bridge that took the visitor straight into the only room on the upper floor of the house.



A man stands in front of a wall in the slanting house. On his right is an unglazed window, through which one can see trees that are partly lit by the sun. The window frame is very markedly tilted to the right. The man stands upright with his right foot on the ground. As for his left foot, only the tip of his sandal reaches the floor. It is dim in the room, and the man is wearing sunglasses. Yet one cannot miss the fact that he is smiling and his entire appearance is amused.

The tilted house was entertaining and amusing in a simple way: it misled the visitors' senses. Stepping into the room, one saw that it was an ordinary small room. The floor was at a normal right angle relative to the windows and walls. Taking the next step required an extra effort. For a short moment, your sense of balance abandoned you, until you reassessed the situation and realised that the entire room was slanted and the floor was rising. This trick (losing and regaining balance) worked, even if you had seen the house from the outside and could thus have prepared for the situation. Stepping into the leaning house was as intense an experience as trying to keep one's balance in a ship rolling on the sea. The illusion was aided by the fact that there was no horizon or any other fixed point visible from the windows, just tree branches. Losing certainty in an unusual situation and then regaining it after a moment is a pleasurable experience. It is the same giddy pleasure you can get in an amusement park or in a horror movie, or on a first visit to a strange town, or when you return home after a long absence. For a short moment, nothing seems familiar, and the senses become more acute to take in all aspects of the new environment.



The joy of having one's senses misled contains features of an undefinable gesture.

The walls of a long, empty corridor have no windows or doors. The picture is taken from the centre of the corridor towards its far end. The floor is light brown, the lower part of the walls up to the middle is painted dark green, while the tops and the ceiling are beige. At the far end of the corridor one can just make out a closed door. At regular but rather long intervals, there are recessed round lights in the ceiling. The light from the fixtures draws rectangular shapes in the corridor that run from the ceiling to the walls and the floor. These bright, frame-like areas get smaller and smaller towards the vanishing point. They alternate with darker intervals between the lights.



The same place as in the previous picture. There is now a man in the corridor who has almost reached the second light seen in the picture. Against the light, he appears as a dark figure carrying a heavy bag over his shoulder. His head and upper torso are leaning to the right. At first glance, one might think that the leaning is caused by the heavy bag. Then one notices that his head is hitting the ceiling, he is too tall to stand upright in the corridor.

The photograph is part of the documentation for a work in the Venice Biennale in 2003, *Untitled, [Corridor]*, (2002) by Monika Sosnowska (1972-). It consisted of a free-standing box-like structure that was 15 m long, 2.25 m wide and 2.5 m tall. On the narrow side of the box, there was a life-sized door. It was the entrance into a carefully constructed illusion. Looking from the door, you appeared to be looking into a corridor dozens of metres long. The floor was made of concrete, painted brown. Stepping into the corridor, you noticed that the walls and the ceiling narrowed very quickly. Soon it was impossible to stand up straight, and the door at the other end of the corridor was only about 50 cm tall. The lights in the ceiling were installed at decreasing intervals and got smaller towards the back end of the corridor. Looking from afar, you had the impression that the interval between the lights remained constant. The border between the green and the beige paint on the walls slanted downwards, even though from the entrance it seemed clearly horizontal. Every visitor initially saw a short, boxlike construction where the work was housed. And yet the illusion worked. Only when someone stepped into the corridor did the suggested reality get a point of reference and the deception collapse. The work was a *trompe l'oeil* in three dimensions, and one where the collapse of the illusion was just as important as its creation.

One artist who has used similar effects in his work is Markus Raetz (1941-). "Many of his works make spectators doubt their own eyes. For example, his sculptures depict different things depending on the viewing angle. His prints show viewing situations where the viewer receives information on the environment only through deficient observations. Reality is ultimately only a collection of observed things that the mind binds together into a whole." (Raetz 2004.)



The moment when an illusion is shattered can also be experienced as an undefinable gesture.



A kerbstone between the pavement and the traffic lane is photographed straight from above. The vertical kerbstone takes up about one third of the area of the horizontal picture. It is made of pale beige stone. Close to the top edge of the picture is a dark line, the seam between two adjacent kerbstones. At the left-hand edge of the upper kerbstone is a white spot the size of a big button. At the very top of the picture, near the right-hand side of the kerbstone, is an orange-coloured spot of the same size. Below that, near the right-hand side of the stone, is a green spot, and below that, a larger, blue spot that touches the seam between the two kerbstones. On the other side of the seam, on the right-hand side of the lower kerbstone, there is a red spot, flanked on the left by a bright orange spot. Diagonally down and left from that is a barely discernible, faded pale blue spot. Continuing on the right-hand half of the stone, a good distance below the red-orange pair of dots, is a two-part white spot of indeterminate shape. It looks as if the paint had run before drying. To the left and partly overlapping the lower part of the white spot is a small yellow spot. The street is wet, the asphalt is gleaming. The colours of the spots on the kerbstone shine brightly.



A kerbstone is photographed directly from above from a height of about one metre. On both sides of the mottled pale beige stone is wet, shiny asphalt. On the right-hand side of the picture is a small depression that opens towards the kerbstone. At its longest, the depression spans the width of the entire photograph, and three cigarette butts are visible at its bottom. One butt is at the middle of the picture, the two others are side by side in the upper part of the picture. At the same height as these two butts, on top of the kerbstone, is a faded red dot. The dot is on the right-hand edge of the stone, it is about three centimetres in diameter. Slightly lower, on the other edge of the kerbstone, is a white spot of the same size. Below that, again on the right side, is a triangle of dots: a faded white one, whose edge stretches all the way to the faded orange spot to its right. Between these two dots, slightly below and half overlapping them, a white opaque dot has been painted. Below the triangle, at the extreme right edge of the kerbstone, is a small deep-blue dot. Slightly to the left of that is a small yellow dot. Below the blue and the yellow dot is the partly broken seam of the kerbstone. The lower left corner of the stone was apparently damaged on installation, and a small piece of stone was glued back with mortar.

A pale beige kerbstone is seen vertically on the left side of the picture. The right-hand edge of the stone coincides with the centre line of the photograph. The edge is worn round. There are about a dozen coloured dots on the stone. The dots are all on the right-hand side of the stone close to one another. Only one white dot stands separate from the others near the upper edge of the picture. The concentration of dots contains the following dots: at the very edge of the kerbstone is a blue dot, and immediately below that, a red one. The red dot overlaps with the blue one. Diagonally down and left is a faded white dot, and below that a faded pale blue dot. Directly below that is a dark green dot, with a bright orange dot to the left. Between and below these is a large, opaque, slightly misshapen white dot. To the left of the kerbstone is a narrow strip of black asphalt. To the right of the kerbstone is a wide strip of dark, gleaming, wet asphalt, the reflections on which suggest it slopes towards the kerbstone. Quite near the kerbstone is a small pile of light brown stuff that seems organic.

These dots were discovered in the streets of Rome on kerbstones at about 20 m intervals. A spring shower had swept away the dust, and the variegated groups of dots shone on the surface of the wet kerbstones. The assortment of colours was repeated from one site to the next, and the opaque white paint had always run slightly. The dots on the pavement were in places where there was a storm drain, and it is possible that the dots had to do with the maintenance of the drains. In my imagination I saw the dots as part of a game in which each player has his or her own signature colour. By marking a place with the colour, the player indicated having 'found' the other players. What caught my interest was that I had come across a sign system that was unknown to me. I followed with interest the repeating clusters of dots, without understanding their meaning. For someone, the dots were a clear message, whereas I merely wondered at the strange apparitions in the street.



The appearance of coloured dots on the kerbsides of Rome are an undefinable gesture.

2.5 Examples of Situations to be Turned into Artworks

It is my contention that putting plants in the street (p. 30–33) is the outcome of an undefinable gesture. Planting flowers in front of the house is a concrete and a symbolic act at the same time. Presumably the flowers are planted there because it is nice to enhance one's environment and to follow how the flowers grow. For the passers-by, the flowerbeds are suggestive of the attitudes of the tenants of the house. They communicate a personal message. I will return to this topic and the works made on that basis in the next chapter (p. 62).

The clusters of coloured dots on kerbstones are also traces of undefinable gestures (p. 56–59). They are traces of physical human action (the painting of dots). But the marking of the kerbstones with coloured dots is also a symbolic act. Shining on wet asphalt, the dots seem to belong to a communication system whose purpose is hidden from the passer-by. Presumably whoever made these dots was marking a fact, unknown to us, for functional reasons. For me, the interesting thing is precisely this, the 'passivity' of the dots, that they are not declamatory in any way.²⁹ Another crucial thing is that the meaning of the dots is allowed to (and does) remain unknown.³⁰

The 'freshly completed situation' (p. 27) is also an undefinable gesture. The repairs may take years, and the purpose of the workers has not been to stage some (imaginary) setup called a 'freshly completed situation'. And yet they expressed – by leaving the sawdust on the ground – their attitude of professionalism or professional pride. The situation seems to say: "Sawdust is not litter, the traces of work may remain visible." The situation also involves transitory action (the unswept sawdust indicates how the repairs on the fence were brought to completion). The trace of this action cannot survive long in a public outdoor space. The momentariness of human activity in relation to its location contains features of the undefinable gesture, and is therefore a subject I consider suitable for turning into an art piece.³¹

²⁹ The spots could hardly be graffiti: they are too boring, their message is not declamatory. Whoever painted them does not seem to have had any particular desire to convey anything except some technical or functional message.

³⁰ A work in progress on this theme: I am planning a public artwork for a new residential district, Leimilä, to be built in Vantaa. I will mark boulders and stones, retaining walls and kerbstones with clusters of coloured dots. The dots are coloured glass rods that are sunk in holes drilled in the stone. The interior surface of the rods is treated so that light is reflected off the coloured dots. The dots are thus passive sources of light.

³¹ This work still awaits realisation.

3. Mimesis of Imagination

3.1 The Gesture of Placing Potted Plants on a Windowsill

Walking in the street, one may notice houseplants in the windows of offices or residential buildings. One may imagine how people have, each in their own way, placed the plants on the sill. After the plant is placed there, the pot is often turned slightly to optimise its position relative to incoming light and other plants in the room. Putting a houseplant on a windowsill is an unobtrusive, mundane, yet very carefully executed gesture.

In my artistic practice I reconstruct situations that allude to some ordinary, unintentional or unnoticed human activity, and transfer them into a new context. Those responsible for making these undefinable gestures (people) are generally not visible as such in my works, I only work on the traces they have left.

In the mimetic reconstruction of an undefinable gesture into a work of art, my aim is to retain in the final piece the inconspicuousness or unintentionality of the gesture in the original situation. What, then, is the relationship between the processed gesture and the original situation? For example, can the gesture of setting a potted plant on a windowsill be presented in a non-narrative form? Is there some way of ensuring that an everyday, undefinable gesture will in fact be conveyed when it is recontextualised in a work of art?

I posed these questions to Aristotle, the ancient authority on mimetic art, and in that imaginary dialogue with him, I tried to discover how the abovementioned idea for a work of art (placing flowers on a windowsill) should be implemented.

3.2 Mimesis in the Texts of Aristotle: Potential Worlds (Paradox and Catharsis)

A summary of Aristotle's ideas concerning mimesis is to be found in his *Poetics*.³²

According to Aristotle, poetry (*poiesis*) and its genres – tragedy, comedy and epic poetry – are all mimetic arts. The genres differ in terms of the means of expression used in them, yet they are all mimetic. In the extant part of *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses tragedy first and foremost.

The purpose of poetic texts and art in general is, for Aristotle, to present general, imagined, potential or even impossible worlds instead of reality.³³ This is apparent in the following quotation from the beginning of *Poetics*, where Aristotle defines the difference between tragedy and comedy:

32 By contrast, Plato's observations on the subject are scattered throughout his writings.

33 The subject matter of tragedy is universal truths, and the heroes too are universal characters rather than real people.

“It is just in this respect that tragedy differs from comedy. The latter sets out to represent people as worse than they are to-day, the former as better.” (1448a 16–18)

The people mentioned here do not refer to any real persons, but to ‘average persons’. No such persons exist in real life, which is why they cannot be imitated. The German scholar of antiquity, Jürgen H. Petersen, shows in his *Mimesis – Imitatio – Nachahmung* in detail why the concept of mimesis in antiquity did not have to do with imitation. According to Petersen, ‘currently living people’ is an abstraction that has no proper existence as such. A poet, however, can present a fantasy or an imaginary account of what these ‘contemporary people’ look like and how they might conceivably act.³⁴

The characters in tragedy and comedy are fictitious, invented. We can only imagine their personal characteristics, and this fantasy of them can then be represented.

“Since the poet represents life, as a painter does or any other maker of likenesses, he must always represent one of three things—either things as they were or are; or things as they are said and seem to be; or things as they should be.” (1460b 8–11.)

This passage in *Poetics* opens up numerous interpretations. It remains incontestable, however, that faithful imitation of reality was not for Aristotle the central task of mimetic art. Mimetic poetry is not about presenting facts. For Aristotle, art is not about reality; it transcends reality. Art is not imitation, it brings forth new things. It is this bringing forth of the new which, for Aristotle, is creative work. In this, he departs from the thinking of his mentor, Plato (427–347 BC).³⁵

The essence of mimetic representation, for Aristotle, is that it transcends the sensory world of experience and presents action as potential, as something it probably is, or, under the internal rules of the mimetic work, necessarily has to be. As Aristotle puts it: “[...] a poet's object is not to tell what actually happened but what could and would happen either probably or inevitably.” (1451a 36–38). The existing world is included in this account to ensure a convincing representation. For example, excerpts from the life of living or dead persons or from historical events are used to make the poetic representation more convincing or realistic. Reference to real events and persons is a tool for the imagination. For Aristotle, the central concern was the effect on the viewer of the depicted thing, such as its credibility, for example.

As regards the actual realisation of my own work, the informa-

34 Petersen 2000, p. 39.

35 Plato discusses mimesis in the third book of *The Republic*. He explains that, in a mimetic story, it is as if the writer assumed the habits of another person instead of speaking as himself. This ‘as if’ is one of the hallmarks of mimesis, it describes the relationship between the writer and the character. The writer does not speak directly, as a writer, but through the intermediary of the character. He or she assumes the features of the character, enters the character and then appears in the guise of someone else. The German word *Schein* (from the verb *scheinen*: how something appears or seems) describes aptly Plato's attitude towards mimetic arts: they are based on a kind of state of presumption or assumption. The mimetic ‘as if’ has subsequently been generally understood, translated and used to denote imitation.

According to Plato, artists engaging in mimetic art produce nothing but illusions. In his doctrine of ideas, he shows that mimetic art is based on external and limited appearance (*doxa*, Ger. *Schein*; see Plato 1992, 595c–601c). Appearances are removed from truth, and because deviating from truth is immoral, the makers of mimetic art have no place in Plato's ideal state. Mimetic arts present observations of things without understanding the ideas they are based on. Therefore, according to Plato, mimetic artists are incompetent – a poet describing medicine does not know how to practise it, and so on.

tion provided by Aristotle thus far gives me relatively free hands. In processing the gesture of placing potted plants on a windowsill, I can use any elements that serve the purpose of the work.

The purpose of mimetic representation is, according to Aristotle, to awaken aesthetic pleasure in the viewer. This pleasure is achieved by adhering to the mimetic model, which is based on evoking certain emotions, namely fear and pity, and their subsequent purging (catharsis).³⁶ Aristotle allows any means that make the representation more convincing and reinforce its aesthetic impact. To achieve this, even impossible and paradoxical events are allowed. In *Poetics*, he says: "[...] a convincing impossibility is preferable to that which is unconvincing though possible." (1461b 11–13). He also says: "[...] it is likely that many quite unlikely things should happen." (1456a 23–24).³⁷ In Aristotle's view, the inclusion of a paradoxical improbability in a poetic text may well increase the credibility of the represented event, and thereby also its impact.³⁸

I see the starting points of a work I am making as ordinary, mundane events. Because I do not depict people in my works directly, the 'heroes' in my piece might instead be the houseplants. I assume them to be rather touching and paradoxical 'characters'.

The crucial thing in mimetic representation as conceived by Aristotle is the author's relationship with the depicted reality in the work. Oiva Kuisma describes the author's position as follows: "[The relationship between art objects and what they are based on, i.e. mimesis] would not exist without authors – art objects are, from the practical viewpoint, always artefacts. Someone made them. When we speak of artistic mimesis, we must therefore take into account the concept family of 'skill – author – praxis'." (Kuisma 1991, Introduction.) According to Kuisma, in order to understand the meaning of the concept of mimesis, we must also examine its 'proximate' environment. Mimesis is always part of some conceptual framework, and only by taking that framework into account can we unravel the meaning of the concept of mimesis itself. (Kuisma 1991, p. 83.)

As an artist, I take the reality I depict very seriously. When I was studying the environment of houseplants (i.e. homes), I noticed that the nature of the plants could be used to deduce something about the nature of the homes and the people living in them. The houseplants were thus one of the indicators of their environment. The act of moving the plants to another place (such as a gallery, for example), might emphasise the property of the plants as indicators of their original homes.³⁹

According to Petersen, with his concept of mimesis Aristotle defines the special characteristics of poetics, while also providing, for

36 Catharsis, see Appendix (p. 98).

37 Even the use of errors is allowed, according to Aristotle, see Aristotle 1932, 1460b 22–32 and Petersen 2000, p. 49.

38 The French philosopher and author Denis Diderot (1713–1784) showed how the mimetic paradox can also involve the mode of presentation. In *Paradox of Acting* (1773/77, published in 1830), he discusses the mimetic paradox by describing what a good actor should be like: "Extreme sensibility makes middling actors; middling sensibility makes the ruck of bad actors; in complete absence of sensibility is the possibility of a sublime actor." (Diderot, 2001, p. 81). There is a paradox here: "For an artist to be able to give everything that he has, to be able to produce and to perform everything, he himself must be nothing. He must only have a general skill by virtue of which he is able to address all possible things, roles, actions, characters, etc." (Lacoue-Labarthe 2003, p. 25). For Diderot, the performer is an artist who has to be devoid of personal characteristics. Only he who at the moment of the performance has nothing of his own is able to bring out endlessly the matter to be presented. Although the ideas of Diderot and of Aristotle on the actor's work and its significance are very different, they nevertheless share the notion that the artist's craft consists of mimetic representation.

39 For example, in *Conference of Christmas Cactuses* (2001) (for a description, see p. 65–67), the plants were clearly different in appearance (for example, there were wilted or healthy individuals, and the colour of the leaves ranged from grey-green to dark green). I felt that one could tell in the gallery that they came from different homes.

the first time in history, a general description of the artistic endeavour (Petersen 2000, p. 47). For Aristotle, mimesis is a description or a representation of something that transcends existence; this is a typical property of the arts, one which also dissociates them from the real world. That which is brought forth in art is always fiction, and the act of bringing it forth is a mimetic action. As the author of the work, the artist occupies a creative position. And yet the viewer, too, is taken seriously: he or she is seen as a thinking creature who, while understanding that something like a theatrical performance is real, knows that the events and characters depicted in it are imaginary. Mimetic representation requires a thinking, self-aware author, but those qualities are also required of the viewer. A mimetic performance offers enjoyable moments in spite of the transparency of the drama, or perhaps precisely because of it. The mimetic performance itself, regardless of its topic, is enjoyable, because the viewer is conscious of the fictitiousness of the performance.⁴⁰

In other words, we must not underestimate the viewer. Houseplants are dependent on the people who tend them. The conditions of the place where they are (light, temperature, draught and so on) are also important to the plants' well-being. When I use houseplants as elements in my work, I trust that the abovementioned things are communicated to the viewer by the nature of the individual plants. Nor is there any need to disguise the plants as art objects, as something they are not: they are allowed to be what they are, houseplants brought to the gallery from the windowsills of people's homes. In the end, I decided that plants borrowed from people's living rooms (houseplants as protagonists) could well be a possible starting point for a work.

3.3 Mimetic Realisation of the Idea

I had Aristotle's ideas of mimetic representation in mind when I was processing the gesture of placing houseplants on the windowsill. I made two works on the subject, both of which involved transferring existing objects into a new context. In the first piece, *Autumn Conference of Christmas Cactuses* (2001), cactuses (Schlumbergera) borrowed from people's homes were gathered for the duration of the exhibition onto a platform standing on the floor, thus giving the plants an opportunity to exchange greetings and news with their fellows. After the show, each cactus was returned to its own windowsill.

In the other piece, *The Charge of the Spider Plants* (2004), the audience brought spider plants from their homes and offices to take part in a downhill race organised on a sloping street in Kuopio, Finland.

40 The mimetic performance and its relationship to the viewer could perhaps also be compared to Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (distancing effect) which tells the viewer in no uncertain terms that the drama takes place in a different reality from that of the viewer's. Enjoyment of the performance resides in this, not in viewers forgetting their own reality to immerse themselves (temporarily) in the depicted world.



Denise Ziegler, *Conference of Christmas Cactuses*, 2001. Plant installation: Christmas cactuses (*Schlumbergera*) brought from private homes. Gallery Sculptor, Helsinki, Finland.



Denise Ziegler, *The Charge of the Spider Plants*, 2004. Event: Downhill race of spider plants, Anti Festival, Kuopio, Finland.



Denise Ziegler, *The Charge of the Spider Plants*, 2004. Event: Downhill race of spider plants, Anti Festival, Kuopio, Finland.

At home, the owner of houseplants may decide to move pots from one windowsill to another to regroup the plants; otherwise the plants' mobility is restricted to the movement of their leaves in a draught from the window, or motions occasioned by growth. *The Charge of the Spider Plants* injected some speed into the otherwise placid potted plants, and the merry competition involved comparing the speed of different individuals.

The crucial thing in both works was that they were based on fantastical ideas: "What might potted plants discuss if they met in a conference?" or "Spider plants are considered fast-growing plants. But how fast are they really?"⁴¹ Neither question has anything to do with mathematical-logical thinking.

My works are not attempts to answer such questions. Instead, through their hilarity, the works draw attention to the unnoticed everyday gesture that is the placing of potted plants on windowsills.

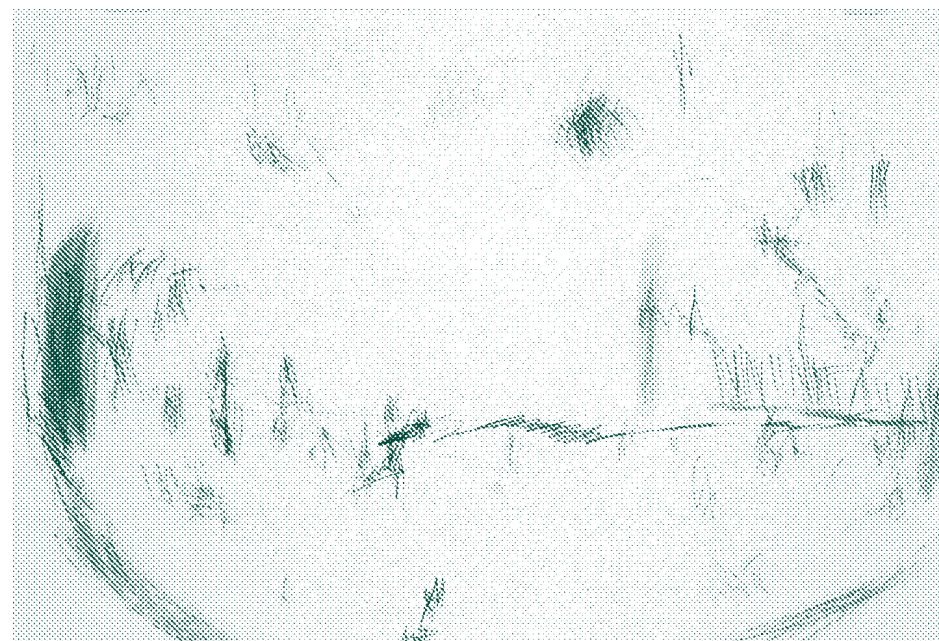
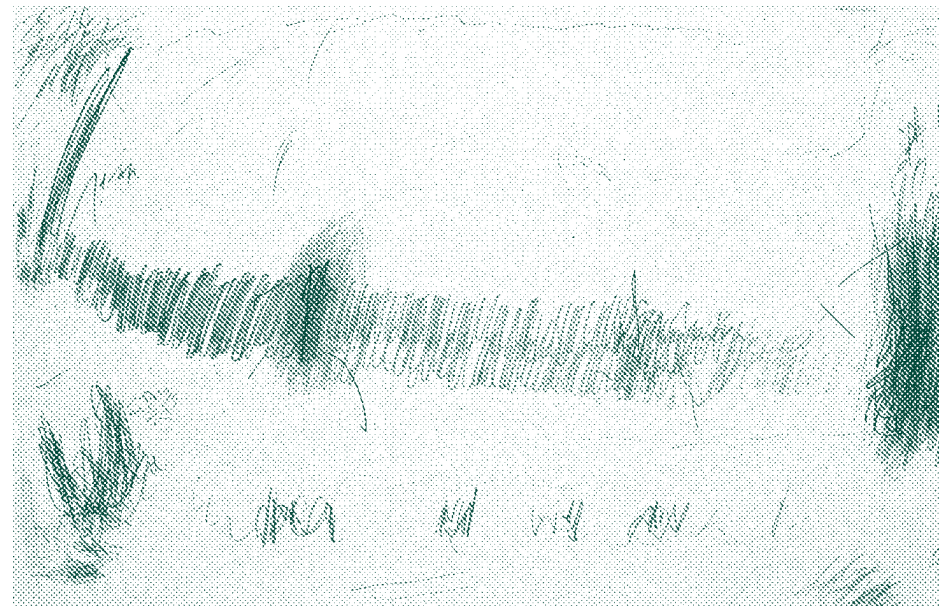
I transposed that act into the gallery and the street, exchanging the windowsill for an imaginary conference table in the case of the cactuses, and for downhill cars in the case of the spider plants. My aim was to dissociate the works from the 'real' world – in that they would contain conflicting and paradoxical features – and also that they would satisfy the mimetic criteria for a 'representation of creative fiction'. Through their poetic style, they might bring forth the attitude with which people treat houseplants.

The works described above can both be realised again in other contexts. Entirely new houseplants can be used instead of the ones that participated in these two events, without altering the concept of the piece. The realisation of these works is one possible interpretation of the gesture of placing plants on a windowsill; it is a presentation in that particular time and place. The works described here are thus situation-specific results of the concept on which they are based.⁴²

The mimeticity of imagination described in *Poetics* is perhaps one of the oldest concepts in art theory. Yet, even in Aristotle's *Poetics*, mimesis is a very nuanced concept. I will next discuss the detailed advice Aristotle gives in *Poetics* on how mimetic action – the representation of human action – should take place.

41 Quotation from the invitation to the inhabitants of Kuopio to participate in the downhill race of the spider plants. (Anti Festival, 2004, Kuopio).

42 Contemporary art quite often involves the creation of different versions of one and the same idea, and the seriality which that entails. An example from my own practice is the series in which I transpose the auditory environment into drawings. In the resulting *Sound Maps* (1996–2001) I use lines to render sounds in a graphic medium. Recording and reconstructing the environment by drawing the sounds in it is a mimetic action. The interpretation comprises actions – listening and drawing lines. The sound maps embody a conceptual shift, in which the auditory environment is transposed into lines of different thickness and shape.



Denise Ziegler, *Sound Maps* (Marbella), 2001. Detail of a series of drawings, pencil on paper, à 32.5 cm x 41 cm.

4. Through Aristotle's Poetics to a Visual Artwork of the Undefinable Gesture

4.1 The Gesture of Opening an Envelope, and the Gesture of Drawing a Line on a Map

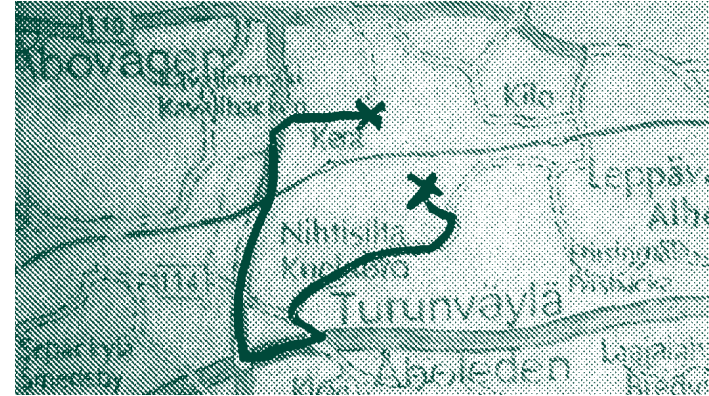
In my mimetic practice, I take events that contain undefinable human actions or traces thereof, and turn them into artworks. To give an example: in the series of drawings entitled *Torn* (2007), each of the drawings represents the traces, on the upper part of an envelope, of the act of it being opened. The series shows that the traces of tearing are different in every envelope. Yet there are similarities as well: the upper right-hand corner has always been bent out, and a small hole made under it. The envelope is obviously opened by inserting the index finger into the opening and pulling the finger up along the upper edge of the envelope. The upper left-hand corner is untorn in all envelopes. However, my drawings only depict one possible way of opening an envelope. Each person has his or her own way of performing this task.



Denise Ziegler, *Torn*, 2007. Detail of a series of drawings, pencil on paper, 30 cm x 82 cm.

We are not generally interested in the trace left by the act of tearing open an envelope. What interests us is to get at the content inside the envelope. The manner in which the envelope is opened generally has no effect on its content. The tear in the envelope can therefore be considered the result of an undefinable gesture, or, to be more precise, it is the unnoticed by-product (tear) of an intentional act (opening a letter).

Another example of processing the traces of undefinable activity into art is the series of paintings *There, not There* (2003).



Denise Ziegler, *There, not There*, 2003. Detail from a series of paintings, oil on canvas, 30 x 52 cm.

The paintings are based on a survey of traffic behaviours commissioned by the City of Espoo. Motorists were asked to draw on a map the routes they take near Ring Road II in Espoo. In my work, the map and the marks drawn on it with a ballpoint or a felt-tip pen are painted in oil on a canvas in a scale of 10:1. The people participating in the survey sought to reconstruct the route they drove by drawing it on a map. Although everyone had his or her own way of drawing the line on the map, that was not relevant to the survey. The only relevant thing in the survey was where the line started, went and ended.⁴³

In processing selected situations into artworks, I was careful to ensure that the traces of the unintentional or undefinable action would be represented in my works in their entirety. The trace of the action of tearing an envelope is shown in the drawings from beginning to end; the traces of the routes drawn on a map in *There, not There* are shown in the paintings in their entirety (a short route presented on a small canvas, a long route on a large one).

Complete representation of human action is one of the definitions of mimetic representation.⁴⁴

Searching for more information on mimetic representation, I 'consulted' Aristotle's *Poetics*. My main question was: how can the undefinable action that I am investigating be turned into a work of art?

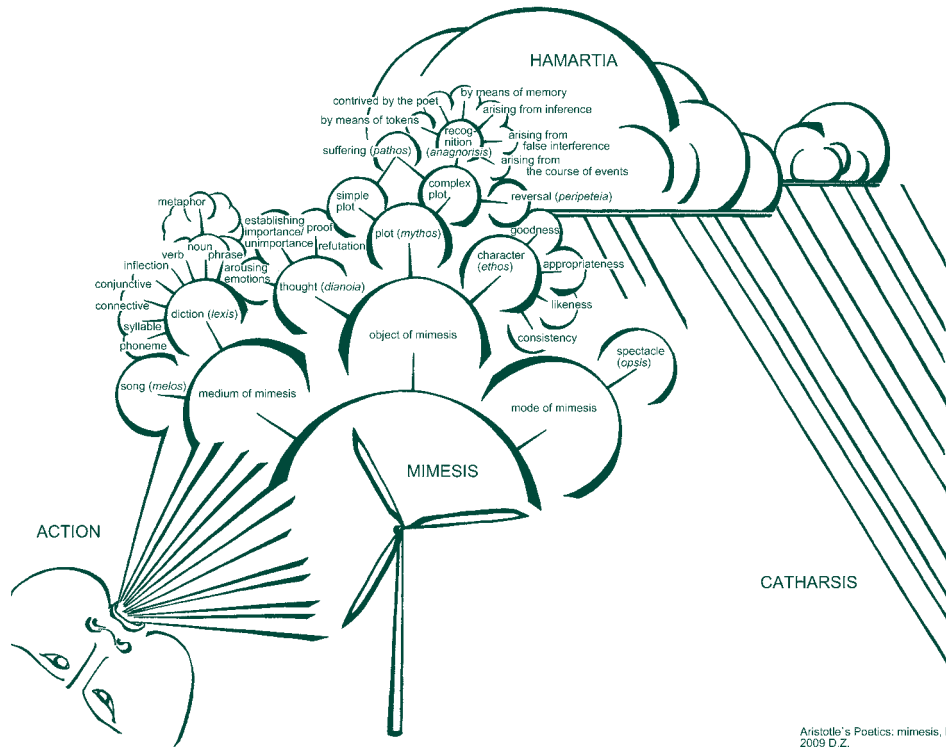
4.2. The Mechanism of Poetics

According to Aristotle, mimesis – the representation of human action – takes place in poetry (tragedy) primarily through the narrative in the manuscript. The diagram reproduced on the inside of the back cover shows Aristotle's conception of the mechanism of tragedy as he presents it in *Poetics*.⁴⁵ The diagram shows that plot and character

⁴³ This fortuitousness or undefinability of action is a crucial thing to which I will return at the end of the chapter.

⁴⁴ See Aristotle 1932, 1450a 15–19 and 1450b 24–27.

both play a central part in mimetic representation (in poetry). It is my contention that mimetic representation is not anchored to plot or character, nor is it restricted to poetry alone, but can equally well be applied to non-narrative visual art and the representation taking place therein.⁴⁶ Here, I want to adapt the mechanism of tragedy in *Poetics* into (conceptual) contemporary art. I do this by placing mimetic works of visual art into Aristototle's scheme of mimetic representation.



An enlargement of the diagram can be found inside the back cover of the book.

The diagram shows that Aristotle's mechanism for mimetic representation consists of five elements. They are (from left to right) song, diction, thought, plot and character, which all develop towards hamartia and catharsis. These five elements all belong to the categories of the object and the medium of mimetic representation.

The sixth constituent of mimetic representation, spectacle (*opsis*), belongs to the category of the mode of mimesis. The mimetic mode and its attendant element of mimetic representation, *opsis*, were not of particular interest to Aristotle.

In adapting *Poetics* to contemporary art, I am also aware of the fact that the prevailing notion regarding artistic genres differs from that of antiquity. I therefore consider it justified to place mimetic works of visual art into this category of mode. With the term 'mimetic visual arts' I refer to works of art whose premises or starting points are inseparable from human action.

In so doing, I add a seventh element into Aristotle's category of the mode of mimetic representation. The new element allows us to interpret the theory of tragedy through conceptual visual artworks and vice versa. It functions as a link between Aristotle's *Poetics* and contemporary art. The seventh element of mimetic representation, next to *opsis*, is the mimetic visual artwork. What does mimetic visual art consist of? Are all works of visual art that derive from human action mimetic in character?

4.3 Representation of Complete Action

According to the rules of *Poetics*, a mimetic work of art must represent human action. This action must be presented completely, from beginning to end. In *Poetics*, Aristotle writes:

"A whole is what has a beginning and middle and end." (1450b 28)

Aristotle's remarks on the subject do not end here, however, and he goes on to define the meaning of 'beginning', 'middle' and 'end'. I think these explanations are essential for defining what Aristotle understanding of 'whole and complete'.

"A beginning is that which is not a necessary consequent of anything else but after which something else exists or happens as a natural result. An end on the contrary is that which is inevitably or, as a rule, the natural result of something else but from which nothing else follows [...] Well constructed plots must not therefore begin and end at random, but must embody the formulae we have stated." (1450b 28–34)

According to Aristotle, nothing prior to the beginning exists, and nothing may follow after completed action. One essential aspect of the wholeness of action is, for Aristotle, that the action is dissociated from the contexts that precede and follow the action.

45 The Appendix (p. 96–99) presents a summary of the key points in Aristotle's *Poetics* which are relevant to my own work.

46 The principal subject matter of a mimetic work of visual art is traces or results of a specific human action.

4.4 Mimetic Representation, and Representation of the Fertile Moment

The notion of representing human action wholly and completely can be used to distinguish a mimetic work of visual art from non-mimetic works. This distinction does not imply anything about the quality of a work; it refers to works of different types, and also to different working strategies of the artist.

It is my view that a work of visual art within which some human action or its traces are presented in their entirety is different from a work that represents some specific moment of action. A case in point of the latter could be the statue of the Finnish long-distance runner Paavo Nurmi (Wäinö Aaltonen, 1925),⁴⁷ located in front of the Olympic Stadium in Helsinki. The statue depicts a running man. It presents a moment in the motion of running, in which the position of the feet and the rest of the body point both to the moments that precede the depicted event, as well as moments that come later. The running motion is arrested in a fertile moment⁴⁸ so that the work points to both times. In other words, the work does not represent the whole of the action of running, but a certain moment within it. I call this is a fertile moment. Under the definition presented above, works based on the depiction of the fertile moment do not belong within the scope of the concept of mimetic representation. By contrast, works that depict the whole of an action or its traces do belong to mimetic representation. A mimetic rendering of the running of Paavo Nurmi might be a statue depicting a running man with a (suitably scaled) planet Earth under his feet. That work would represent one running step of Paavo Nurmi in one world (this world) from the beginning to the end, and the next step would already be in 'the hereafter'.⁴⁹

Many works of art, such as *Nude Descending a Staircase*⁵⁰ by Marcel Duchamp⁵¹ or Eadweard Muybridge's⁵² motion photographs, do represent an action as a whole, but in them the motion is not carried to its conclusion, it can only be imagined to continue beyond the depicted moment. The action in these works has not been dissociated from its preceding and subsequent contexts. One step of the woman descending the stairs is followed by the next step, which in turn is the precondition for the one that follows. The depicted action is halted at some point, determined by the artist.

Muybridge's animated series of photographs each constitute a loop wherein the galloping motion of a horse⁵³, for example, continues forever. Thus the first image in the loop is preceded by the last image – instead of nothing, as required of mimetic representation as defined by Aristotle. In these examples, a certain movement is

depicted, which is divided into several fertile moments. They point to events that preceded and follow the moment.

My reason for excluding from mimetic representation works based on the fertile moment is that they only represent once specific aspect of human action. All the forms of mimetic representation presented in my research seek to depict human action as a whole.

4.5 Undefinable Action

What should action be like for it, or its traces, to be representable in their entirety and be concluded within the framework of a work of visual art? In Poetics, Aristotle states that the actions of tragic heroes can be complete and be brought into conclusion, because the actions are not specific historical persons, operating instead on the mythic level of general truths (1451b 7–10). According to Aristotle, by representing general truths, action in poetry can become a detached whole and thus achieve its aim, catharsis.⁵⁴

It is my contention that a representation of human action can be complete and can be brought to conclusion not only through the representation of general truths (universals), as in Aristotle, but also when the represented action is not of a specific kind (such as the general truths in tragedy), but undefinable.

In the work *Torn*, discussed in the beginning of this chapter, the representation of tearing (the drawing) presents the traces of an undefinable action brought to its conclusion. In *Torn*, all the stages of the action (beginning, middle and end) are visible (represented) at the same time, and they are treated equally. The actual manner of tearing the envelope is of no consequence: the action can become complete because the tearer's attention is focused on the content of the envelope. The envelope is generally discarded. In the other example, *There, not There*, the route driven by the car is marked as a line on a map. The traces of the action of drawing are represented in the work from beginning to end. The manner in which the line is drawn is almost fortuitous, and can therefore be brought to conclusion practically without any consequences.

In the latter example, the viewer has no background information about the starting points of the work (that the concept for the series is derived from a traffic behaviour survey). All the viewer has to look at and consider are the painted maps and the lines on them. The lines have been partly removed from their context, in addition to which they have been enlarged and rendered as paintings. This enables our attention to be drawn to the gesture of the lines themselves, revealing perhaps something about the personality or attitude of the anonymous persons who drew them: some of the lines are deliberate and

47 Paavo Nurmi (1897–1973), long-distance runner. Wäinö Aaltonen (1894–1966), sculptor.

48 On the fruitful moment, see note 22, p. 16.

49 The imaginary metaphorical work would also refer to the adage of Heraclitus (535–475 BC): "Everything changes, and nothing remains still." (In some translations, this is followed by: "You cannot step twice in the same river.")

50 *Nu descendant un escalier*, no 2, 1912.

51 Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), French artist.

52 Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904), English photographer.

53 One of Muybridge's photographic series shows a naked woman descending a staircase: *Woman walking down stairs*, late 19th century.

54 The scholar of Greek literature Stephen Halliwell observes that "Universals should enter into poetry, it seems to follow, on a level somewhere between abstraction and common sense-experience." (Halliwell 2002, p. 194)

slowly drawn, others are rendered quickly in a confident hand. In a similar way, the traces of tearing in *Torn* can allude to the tearer's energetic or careful personality.

An undefinable gesture describes a sub-area of human action that is an integral part of our everyday life, but may not register in our awareness and thus remains beyond causal relations. That is also the reason it can be distinguished as an entity in its own right. The constituent elements or indicators of the undefinable gesture include fortuitousness, unobtrusiveness and ordinariness.

4.6 Indicator of the Poetic

I now want to discuss in greater detail the difference between works



Ferdinand Hodler,
Der Holzfäller, 1910. Oil on
canvas, 130 x 101 cm.

of fertile moment and works of mimetic representation. The painting *Der Holzfäller* (1910, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) by Ferdinand Hodler⁵⁵ is a prime example of a work of fertile moment. The painting depicts a man felling a tree with an axe at a moment when the movement of raising the axe to strike the tree (that moment when the action of raising reverses itself into the action of striking) is at its most dramatic and fertile.

An undefinable depiction of the same situation might be a film that shows in a close-up the mouth of the man felling the tree. His tongue might protrude out of the mouth as a sign of tension and concentration when he is about to strike the tree with the axe. As an action it – pushing the tongue out at a moment of concentration – is most likely unintentional, and probably has no bearing on whether the axe hits the tree or not. After the blow, the tongue is retracted. The act of sticking the tongue out can be considered an unnoticed or an undefinable gesture in a moment requiring concentration. In this imaginary work, the context of the action would be removed – the felling of the tree not shown – and all that is visible is the tongue which for some unknown reason would suddenly dart out of the mouth in excitement, and after a moment would withdraw back behind the lips. The action would be the by-product of some other action (striking with the axe); as an action it would be presented in its entirety and would come to a conclusion even though – or perhaps precisely because – it is, as an action, unintentional and fortuitous.

Such an imaginary work would satisfy my criteria for mimetic representation with features of the poetic. In this case, however, the poetic might very well include some comic aspects.

According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, tragedy uses heroes and their mythic deeds as a means to detach human action into a complete entity. Heroic deeds are different from reality and that is precisely why they allow the attainment of the aim of tragedy: in other words, they can have cathartic effects.

In my art, the undefinable gesture is anchored in everyday life, raising mimetically from the flow of human action (apparent) indefinabilities and areas of unnoticed action. This allows the work to attain an impact comparable to that of tragedy. The undefinable gesture can therefore function also as an indicator of the poetic quality of the work.⁵⁶ The represented action becomes complete, and allows the attainment of a state not unlike catharsis: the poetics of the undefinable, in other words, learning about our own humanity.

In the next chapter, I will explain in greater detail how works of undefinable gesture aim, in a manner similar to that of plot and character in tragedy, towards hamartia and catharsis.

⁵⁵ Ferdinand Hodler (1853–1918), Swiss painter.

⁵⁶ If a work contains an undefinable gesture, it in all likelihood also contains features of the poetic.

5. Representation of the Undefinable Gesture

5.1 The Gesture of Tearing Off Corners from a Paper Diary

As I observed earlier, the starting point of my works is action that is ordinary and generally goes unnoticed. One example of such an action is the tearing off of corners from the pages of a paper diary or planner. The paper corner is routinely torn off by twisting it down or up or by pulling it out while pinching the paper tightly between thumb and index finger. The purpose of ripping the corners off is to make it easier to find the current date in the diary. The point of interest is not how the tearing is done, but the fact that the corner is removed. The torn paper corners are discarded as useless.

Human action, such as tearing off paper corners from a diary, contains, in my view, an unnoticed undefinable gesture. The underlying situations of my artworks contain undefinable gestures or their traces. The process of turning these into art often results in three-dimensional object assemblies, but more recently also drawings, videos or written works (a case in point being the Istanbul lecture).

5.2 Representation of the Undefinable Gesture

The undefinable gesture is part of an action. The starting point of my creative practice is a situation where an undefinable gesture is expressed either directly or through its traces. My greatest challenge is how to reconstruct⁵⁷ the situation into a work of art in such a way as to retain its essential characteristics (such as unnoticeability, fortuitousness, unintentionality or surprise). A case in point: how would it be possible to represent the gesture of tearing off a paper corner and the small trace generated in the action (one paper corner being about one centimetre across)? The gesture of tearing generally goes unnoticed, and, with respect to the marks of the tearing, is unintentional and fortuitous. How can one express, in a work of art, the qualities of unintentionality, unnoticeability or fortuitousness? This problem belongs to the sphere of mimesis and, in this particular context, to the interpretative representation of action.

5.3 Representability of Existence

In reconstructing the undefinable gesture and its traces, I come across conflicting and paradoxical situations. For example, an unintentional situation, reconstructed as a work of art, is inevitably an intentional gesture in an exhibition venue. The conflict arises from the difference

57 By the term 'reconstruction' I refer to the process of transforming the underlying pattern of the piece (situation, event, image or object) into a work of art.

between the two gestures, the unintentional one of the original situation, and the intentional one in the gallery.⁵⁸ The representation of an undefinable gesture is always a discordant act.

How does Aristotle's *Poetics* advise us to represent human action?

According to Aristotle, the tragic hero must evoke both fear and pity. He must be someone with an internal conflict. Aristotle considered *King Oedipus*⁵⁹ an exemplary tragedy, because it satisfies all the criteria of a good tragedy.⁶⁰ Oedipus is a fearsome figure (a murderer), who nevertheless inspires compassion (he did not know he was doing wrong). The hero of a tragedy commits, usually unknowingly, a mistake (hamartia)⁶¹ and has to bear the consequences.

In processing the gesture of tearing off paper corners, I wanted the technical solution to be found as a result of the choice of form and material. Any conflicts arising in the realisation of the piece would not need to be removed; on the contrary, they were more than welcome in the final work. How essential are conflicts in a work that represents human action and its traces?

In his lecture 'Oedipus als Gestalt' (Oedipus as Figure),⁶² the French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe⁶³ speaks of conflict as an essential strategy in the depiction of human action. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, the purpose of the character of Oedipus is precisely to serve as a vehicle for the mimetic projection of the conflicts of existence. Oedipus is an idealised character, one whose conflictual personality makes possible the depiction of existence (Lacoue-Labarthe 2003, p. 214) and bearable the understanding of conflict.

The purpose of the mimetic representation of tragedy is to evoke in viewers the emotions of fear and pity, and to enable them to process these emotions (catharsis).⁶⁴ One of the things that allow tragedy to reach its goal of catharsis is the fact that its representation contains conflictual elements.⁶⁵

The conflicts in a mimetic visual work of art are therefore essential for it to have the desired impact. The primary purpose of conflicts in a work representing an undefinable gesture or traces thereof is, just as in tragedy, for the viewers to recognise in them their own humanity. It is this that enables the work to attain an impact not unlike catharsis.

Let us now turn to the question of how conflicting elements should be represented in a visual mimetic work.

5.4 Representation versus Presentation

Tragedy is a strategy of representation in which fact is of secondary interest. Oedipus is presented very briefly: he is the King of Thebes, and has a clubfoot due to an injury sustained as a child. The fate of

58 See also the chapter *Situational Residue* (sub-heading 1.2, p. 13).

59 The figure of Oedipus is discussed here in the way he was seen before being 'appropriated' by Freud. Oedipus represents the human desire of wanting to know oneself, and this desire is expressed first and foremost through Oedipus' actions. Oedipus is what he does, he is the sum of his actions.

60 See Aristotle, 1932, e.g. 1452a 25–31; 1452a 35–36; 1453a 7–12; 1453a 18–22; 1453b 5–6.

61 Aristotle writes about the characteristics of a good tragedy: "[A tragedy must show – D. Z.] the sort of man who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, and yet it is through no badness or villainy of his own that he falls into the fortune, but rather through some flaw in him." (1453a 8–10)

62 The lecture *Oedipus as Figure* was given by Lacoue-Labarthe on 30 September 1983 at the Brown University in Providence, USA. The text of the lecture, in German, is published in *Die Nachahmung der Modemen*, 2003.

63 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1940–2007).

64 Aristotle, in *Poetics*, says: "[...] through pity and fear it effects relief [catharsis] to, these and similar emotions." (1449b 28–29).

65 According to Aristotle, art is about human action (*praxis*) and its purpose is to displace the evil that disrupts social relations. This is why tragedy is about fear (social disconnectedness) and pity (social attachment), which, for Lacoue-Labarthe, are social passions. As Lacoue-Labarthe put it: "Mimesis functions by displacing the social power using the simulacrum or the cunning of reason." (Lacoue-Labarthe 2003, p. 212). This could be compared to the vicarious suffering of Christ in Christianity, where suffering is personified in one person (Jesus, the Son of God), whose redemption earns freedom for all believers.

Oedipus cannot be presented, it must be represented and interpreted again and again.⁶⁶ It needs to be made alive and touching, only then can the character of Oedipus become active. The representation of human activity, mimesis, is not fixed, it shows us just one possible actualisation, such as one that might be the most suitable in the present moment. Later on, some entirely different interpretation may become topical.

The conflicting elements in Oedipus' personality and the fact that he is left undefined both point to the requirements of the representation of humanity. Undefinability and conflict seem to be core conditions of all human action.

According to Lacoue-Labarthe, existence is the definition of one's own identity "through the other in such a way that otherness is contained in identity." He adds: "The truth of dialectics⁶⁷ is the subject, a potential representation of identity of itself." (Lacoue-Labarthe 2003, p. 216–217.) The self-presentation of identity, presentation of the facts concerning the fate of Oedipus, are not enough; the subject can only be expressed in a dialectical, conflictual representation. What does a dialectical representation contain? How does a mimetic representation of the subject differ from its presentation? More generally, how does representation (*Darstellung*) differ from presentation (*Vorstellung*)?

The presentation of a subject (person) takes place in many everyday situations, such as when a third person introduces two persons who have never met:

"May I present: Mrs. R, Mrs. S. Mrs. S, Mrs. R."

Another type of presentation is when a speaker is introduced before a talk:

"Tonight's speaker is E.L. from Turku, her speciality is..."

The presentation can consist of a list of items, such as the list of identifying marks of a suspect, or when a job seeker lists his abilities in a job interview. A list of identifying marks gives a more or less precise idea of the subject. It can always be augmented later.

In representation, by contrast, the subject's being is expressed through his or her actions in a given situation: what his or her handshake is like, whether he or she makes eye contact, his or her poise and facial expression. How the lecturer talks, how he or she articulated thoughts. Although the job seeker is energetic and confident in the interview, his or her behaviour can signal something different. Behaviour is a performance in which the performer represents him- or herself. A presentation, on the other hand, lists facts that do not yet enable the expression of identity.

The following is an everyday example of the blurring of the line

66 The story is a myth, not a historical event.

67 Invented by the ancient Greeks, dialectic is a form of dialogue used by philosophers to search for the truth. It has a close bearing to rhetoric. The word comes from the Greek *dialogesthai*, meaning conversation. In the quotation, Lacoue-Labarthe uses the term in the sense it acquired in German idealism, particularly in Hegel. In Hegel's dialectics, the forms of logic correspond to historical development, and things develop through opposites.

between the documentary and the mimetic strategy. In it, the distinction between a work and its documentation is suspended, which in turn causes the work and its documentation to be confused with each other.⁶⁸

In summer 2004, cartons of Valio Grandi orange juice carried an invitation to a competition:

"Build a vehicle for Kari⁶⁹, win an adventure holiday in the Caribbean! Kari Grandi's camel ran away. Help Kari by building him a new vehicle. You can use the Grandi carton to make it. Take a photo of the vehicle, or make a drawing. The best vehicle will win a prize..."

In the text of the invitation, the work (vehicle) and its documentation (photograph or drawing) are regarded as equivalents. The juice producer has not been too keen on the idea of getting crumpled vehicles in the post, sticky with juice and glue. Neat photographs or drawings, on the other hand, can later be used in marketing. A child might think: "If I make a drawing, perhaps I don't have to build anything, all I have to do is invent a carton vehicle by drawing it." Such a drawing would, I contend, satisfy the criteria for mimetic representation: it would be a representation of something that does not necessarily have to exist, but which does potentially exist.⁷⁰ In this case, the work (drawing) functions as documentation of the result of a mental image (imaginary vehicle). The drawing of the vehicle therefore constitutes mimetic documentation. The work is a representation, not a presentation, it expresses the child's imagination through the drawing (representation).

Everyday situations seem to be rife with a thing familiar from contemporary art, namely that the distinction between presentation and representation is either non-existent or unclear. In my view, a work (of art) is basically a representation and the documentation its presentation.

There is also a great deal of such copying in contemporary art: works are presented in catalogues and other contexts. In painting, the difference is marked between the original and the decidedly smaller printed documentation pictures. One might even suspect that, in order to alleviate this conflict, some American painters in the 1980s made their works specifically with sales catalogues in mind.⁷¹ In that case, the expression becomes, paradoxically, concentrated in the documentation, and the seeing of the original is often a disappointment.

Transitory artworks, such as performances or works created in isolated locations, can afterwards only be appraised through documentation. In all these cases, documentation stands for the work,

68 For me, the documentation of a work of art is both a borderline case of mimetic representation and a kind of relative to the work itself. The documentation can be an interpretation of the work on another level. On the other hand, the documentation can also aim to give a maximally accurate and truthful idea of the work. Often the work and its documentation are insufficiently distinguished from each other, leading to unnecessary confusion.

69 Kari Grandi is a fictional character, the main protagonist in the Finnish TV advertisements for Grandi, a brand of ready-to-drink juice.

70 This is one reason mimesis is not the same as imitation. See also the chapter *Mimesis of Imagination*, p. 62–63.

71 For example, the paintings of Eric Fischl (1948–), Julian Schnabel (1951–) or David Hockney (1937–).

presenting it, but without the documentation itself becoming a work.⁷²

The torn diary corners I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter might be shown as they are, in which case the paper corners would be presented as a collection of objects. Because my intention was to use the work to draw attention to the action of tearing off such corners, I decided to create a serial representation of the traces of the act of tearing paper corners from a diary. I represented the corners in plywood reliefs, enlarged one-hundred-fold. One corner represents one week. My work *Once a Week, for a Year* (2008) comprises 52 parts, each of which represents the traces of tearing one paper corner.

5.5 Mimetic Representation in Conceptual Art

All the artworks included in my research contain some features of conceptual art, and I regard them as being based on 1960s' minimalism and the concurrently developed conceptual art. In conceptual art, the conceptualisation and realisation of the work, or even the mere idea for one, is more important than the actual material object. The essential characteristics of minimalist art are simplicity and an almost impersonal clarity.⁷³ As an example of a traditional (not mimetic) conceptual work of art I shall examine *Earth Kilometer* (1977) in Kassel, a work by Walter de Maria⁷⁴. The work consists of a one-kilometre long brass rod sunk vertically into the earth. The only visible evidence of the work is a small metal circle in a road. Even after its completion, *Earth Kilometer* remains conceptual, because the actual physical work does not come into contact with the viewer. All that attests to the existence of the work is a round mark in a road. In de Maria's work, the idea and its realisation are very close to one another, and the work is perfect, timeless, incontestable. It is therefore also distant and static.

The conceptual approach described above has over time developed in a direction I call mimetic conceptuality. Mimetic conceptuality also includes undefinability and conflictual elements.

The key aspects of mimetic-conceptual representation are – as we have seen – the relationship of a representation of human action with knowledge and reality, as well as undefinability and conflict as part of the strategy of representation. Moreover, the mode of representation in mimetic-conceptual works crucially involves the question of how the idea of the artwork relates to its realisation.⁷⁵ More precisely, how is the realisation affected by a concept that also includes undefinable elements?

A good example of such mimetic conceptual art is the work *Olo no. 22* (2000).⁷⁶

Located on the seafront in Hietalahti in Helsinki, the work

72 The actual work can have different manifestations, and often it has to be realised in a different form because of the time and the place.

73 See e.g. *The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists*, 2009.

74 Walter de Maria (1935–), American sculptor and composer.

75 This underlines the relational aspect of mimesis.

76 The members of the OLO group are Pasi Karjula (1964–) and Marko Vuokola (1967–).



Olo no. 22, 2000. Detail of a public work, Hietalahti, Helsinki.

consists of steel spheres of different sizes that have been mounted over a fairly large area. The spheres seem to have been placed at random, as if they had been thrown there and had come to a halt in their current locations. Some of the spheres stand close to one another, others are separate, and one is in a public indoor space.

“[The work expands] the concept of public monuments by being open to interpretation and non-monumental. There is no beginning or end to *Olo no. 22*; instead, it has a continuous presence in the area.” (*Olo no. 22*, 2000, Helsinki Art Museum)

The work is also lucid and conceptual; its idea could quite well be conveyed verbally or by showing pictures. Yet it stands out from the impersonality of many of the minimalist works of the 1960s. Owing to their seemingly random locations, the steel spheres can be thought to allude to the following event, for example: glass marbles in the palm are thrown all at the same time by opening the hand and flicking the wrist. The result of the throw, just as when playing dice, is unforeseeable, the final resting place of the spheres unpredictable.

The steel spheres in Hietalahti can thus be seen as traces of the act of throwing. The gesture of the throw is fictitious, and undefinable. The work is thus a mimetic realisation of an undefinable throw.⁷⁷ Undefinability and unpredictability seem to be essential parts of the concept of the work.

77 The work is thus also the result of an undefinable gesture.

The placement of the spheres seems just as random or temporary as many other things in the area. For example, the location of the parked cars, buoys in the water, or the people in the area changes from one moment to the next, their simultaneous presence being dictated by changing circumstances. Therefore the work parallels all the other things that are in the area, its individual components – the steel spheres as physical bodies, equal to other objects in the area. The mimeticity of the piece, all the steel spheres having presumably come from the same throw, makes the entire Hietalahti area a ball playing field, without giving preference to any particular spot. At the same time, the work seems to be addressing the passer-by: “We are resting here, you are walking there. We are many, just as you are many.” The work is literally part of the waterfront area in Hietalahti, and suggests that also the people are part of it.

For the passers-by, their own presence in the area may be a particularly intense experience because of the strange and unconventional presence of the work. The geometric shape of the spheres and their polished, reflective surface allude to the theoretical, conceptual aspect of the work. The strange encounter may seem disconcerting to the viewer. This confusion is, in my view, comparable to the emotions of pity and fear awakened by mimetic representation. The strangeness of the spheres triggers a chain of events that functions like hamartia⁷⁸: as the viewer encounters the strangeness, the confusion mounts until it erupts – as in the case of *Olo* no. 22 – into a concrete understanding of the surrounding reality.

It was observed above that the work can be seen as a mimetic representation of an imaginary throw. But for how long can a piece that is a permanent public artwork uphold its expression as the result of a freshly completed throw? The work has been in place for a few years now, and it has already acquired a history of its own. For example, there are scratches on the spheres and weeds have begun to grow at their base. These things indicate the period of time that the spheres have been stationary. ‘Being stationary’ and ‘being present without beginning or end’ are not the same thing at all, however: the weeds were hardly a part of the concept of the work. For me, this green substructure of the work poses a fascinating contradiction to its conceptual origin of having just been thrown there. It is the very unintentionality of the weeds that draws the viewers’ attention and thus alludes dialectically to the concept of the work. Existence is defined here, just as in tragedy, through conflict. The actualisation of the conceptual work invites the viewer to complement it by disregarding the weeds and the scratches so that being would be present and not merely stationary.⁷⁹

78 On hamartia, see also the chapter *Representation of the Undefined Gesture*, p. 79.

79 In my view, a conceptual artwork can be said to be ‘present’ when the idea of the piece is always new when the viewer considers it.



Sampo Malin, *Built Up*, 2007. Wood, pigment, table lamp.

Undefinable and conflicting elements between a conceptual starting point and its realisation can also be found in *Built Up* (2007) by Sampo Malin⁸⁰.

The work consists of a dark-brown night table, and on it a down-turned reading lamp. The drawer of the table is ajar, and the lamp is switched off. On the table, the edge of the drawer and on the floor, white powder (titanium pigment) has been sprinkled so that it describes the oval area lit by the lamp before it is switched off. That part of the cone of light which strikes the wall next to the table was presumably done by painting the wall with water-soluble pigment. The paint representing the light has run down the wall onto the floor. On the night stand, just under the lamp, the white pigment has built up into a tiny, smooth hill. The perplexing pile seems to suggest that the light would have dropped straight down from the lamp and then spread over a larger area. In Malin's work, materialised light has been ascribed the imaginary property of dripping.

The work can be seen as a mimetic interpretation of the consequences of switching off the light. It represents the result of human action, the act of pressing the switch on the lamp. When I was looking at the piece, I almost heard the dry snap of the switch on a night lamp. This interpretation suggests that the work represents, from the viewpoint of the person falling asleep, the kind of trace that materialised light would leave in its surroundings after the lamp is turned off and the person is falling asleep. In other words, the work is about the transition from wakefulness to a dreamlike state. It is precisely because of this that the laws of physics prevailing in the work can depart from those prevailing under 'normal circumstances'.

In normal circumstances, a substance flowing from a point expands on a level surface concentrically, in a widening circle. Flowing into an oval shape from a point at the edge of the oval is, I believe, an impossibility. This conflict in the work is disconcerting, but does not detract from the credibility of the piece. On the contrary, the disconcerting impossibility in the piece is a 'strategic diversion' (Lacoue-Labarthe) which alludes to the idea of the work that contains a bizarre assumption: what if light were to materialise after the lamp is turned off? Malin's work is one possible realisation of this conceptual assumption.

Aristotle considered tragedy a conceptual art: the artist – the poet – writes a script, which is carried out by interpreting it through acting on the stage. Aristotle himself emphasised that tragedies should be considered to be literary works; the stage setting (spectacle) was not important for him.

"Spectacle, while highly effective, is yet quite foreign to the art and has nothing to do with poetry. Indeed the effect of tragedy does not depend on its performance by actors, and, moreover, for achieving the spectacular effects the art of the costumer is more authoritative than that of the poet." (1450b 17-21)

Preference for the written form introduced a more abstract level to tragedy, which facilitated the development of the theory of tragedy. In tragedies that are originally written for the stage, however, many things pass unnoticed if we focus exclusively on the written text. A case in point: Oedipus blinds himself after discovering what he has done. At the end of the play, he demands that he be taken far away from the persons against whom he unknowingly committed his crimes. Even oracles had foretold his exile. Someone who only reads the text has no trouble understanding that Oedipus' exile is where the tragedy ends. But that is not the case for the audience in the theatre. They see a blind Oedipus left standing on the stage. Oedipus is in his every move dependent on his uncle, Creon, who has no intention of taking him anywhere "before the gods have spoken". Meanwhile, Oedipus has to suffer at home and daily meet those whom he had wronged.

By putting out his eyes, Oedipus actively puts himself in a position where he would no longer be in control of his destiny. His insatiable thirst for knowledge facilitated the revelation of truth, and also provoked his own punishment. The latter choice comes across particularly well in a stage production, where an actor, playing the blind man, stands helplessly on the stage.

The performance of the tragedy and its deictic⁸¹ potential express something surprising that is not necessarily observable in the text of the tragedy. The performance can shed light on the written version from a surprising direction.

The realisation of a mimetic-conceptual work of visual art can contain surprising or perplexing features that do not belong to the concept of the piece, but which emerge in connection with its realisation (such as the weeds in the case of *Olo no. 22*). A work can also contain impossibilities (such as the oval spread of substance in *Built Up*).

Also the choice of materials and their properties can be a source of confusion. I think *Once a Week, for a Year* (2008) is a good example of this.

80 Sampo Malin (1977–).

81 The term 'deictic' here refers to representation on the stage.



Denise Ziegler, *Once a Week, for a Year*, 2008. 52 reliefs à 100 cm x 100 cm, plywood. Studio installation.

This work is a realisation of the gesture of ripping paper corners from a diary, discussed in the beginning of the chapter. The realisation of the piece may seem strange precisely because of the choice of material, but also because of the dimensions: the 52 right-angled triangles of unpainted plywood (100 cm x 100 cm) represent enlargements of small paper corners torn from a pocket diary. The signs of tearing are replicated with maximum fidelity to imitate the original paper corners: holes with a diameter of 10 cm are drilled at regular intervals along the hypotenuse, and the plywood between the holes is cut by sawing and grinding. The smooth cut surfaces of the plywood reveal the layers of the material as stripes whose thickness varies depending on the angle of grinding.

The properties of plywood are radically different from those of paper. For instance, bending and tearing plywood would leave very different signs in the material than the torn edges in the finished work (bending and tearing 12 mm thick plywood would take a lot of power, and the result would match that: the uppermost veneer of the plywood would splinter along the grain, and the torn edge would be ragged and full of sharp splinters). The work, therefore, represents an action of tearing which cannot have taken place in the manner described above using plywood. Because it is impossible to tear plywood in the way suggested in the work, the reconstructed signs of tearing in it must point to some other material – paper – and the tearing of that material.

The conflict and strangeness in the realisation of this work can be interpreted as an error, not unlike *hamartia*, the purpose of which is to draw attention to the ordinary and generally unnoticed action that serves as its starting point: *Once a Week, for a Year* presents 52 possibilities of tearing the paper corner off a pocket diary. The work articulates time (weeks, a year), while also giving us time to observe paper corners resulting from a seemingly meaningless action.

The undefinable human gesture that serves as the concept for *Once a Week, for a Year* refers to the mimetic features of the works discussed above (*Olo no. 22*, *Built Up* and *Once a Week, for a Year*) and thereby also to their poetic features. The perplexing strangeness in the realisation of these works is a poetic response to the questions posed in the concept for the work: what would happen if a gigantic hand were to cast gigantic marbles along the seafront? What would happen if a lamp on a night stand were turned off and the light left a trace? What do the traces of tearing paper actually look like?

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Appendix

Aristotle's Poetics

Poetics is a textbook that focuses mainly on tragedy and epic poetry. In it, Aristotle also outlines a broader theory of the performing arts that would cover music, painting, sculpture and dance.⁸²

Poetics is concerned with poetry and its genres. Aristotle gives advice on what a poem must be like “if the poem is to be a success” (1447a 8–9). He also analyses the various parts of poems, their number and definition.

According to Aristotle, poetry (*poiesis*) and its genres (tragedy, comedy, epic poetry) are all mimetic arts. Poetry is a skill (*tekhnē*) that can be learned. Aristotle analyses poetry by dividing it into its constituent parts, classifying them into hierarchical relations of importance and dependency (e.g. plot is divided into its principal and sub-elements).⁸³ Aristotle gives practical and thorough advice on how to construct a work of art. For instance, he lays down the required characteristics of the beginning, the middle and the end. He also emphasises that the depicted action should be whole and complete.

Aristotle discusses the same themes in the various chapters of *Poetics*.⁸⁴ In this summary, I will focus on what Aristotle has to say about the concepts that have key bearing on my research. Aristotle weaves his poetics around three main concepts: mimesis, hamartia and catharsis. Together these three concepts constitute a conceptual schematic for human action.

1. Mimesis

The origins of mimesis go back to the 5th century BC, when a popular pastime in harvest festivals in Sicily was to imitate certain persons by describing their everyday mishaps using dialogue and gestures. Sophron of Syracuse⁸⁵ was one of the first to write down these prose improvisations, thereby introducing a new genre of literature: the mimes (Anderson 1997, p. 25).

1.1 Mimetic Pleasure

According to Aristotle, both mimesis and a sense of harmony and rhythm are intrinsic to humans. It was the pleasure of harmony and rhythm that gave rise to tragic poetry and the associated music. Mimesis, imitation, is natural for humans already as children. Representation brings pleasure: “[...] for we enjoy looking at accurate likenesses of things which are themselves painful to see, obscene beasts, for instance, and corpses.” (1448b 9–12.)

82 The connection between poetry and painting becomes clear in the following passage from *Poetics*: “Since tragedy is a representation of men better than ourselves we must copy the good portrait-painters who, while rendering the distinctive form and making a likeness, yet paint people better than they are.” (Aristotle 1932, 1454b 8–11. See also e.g. 1447a 14–26, 1448a 5–10).

83 See the diagram “Aristotle’s *Poetics*: mimesis, hamartia and catharsis” inside the back cover.

84 The reason for this might be that *Poetics* was not meant to be published, consisting instead of Aristotle’s lecture notes which he wrote in Athens around 330–320 BC.

85 Sophron (5th century BC), Greek poet who lived in Syracuse in Sicily.

1.2 Mimetic Action

Tragedy is a portrayal of action (*praxis*). This action is serious (*spoudaios*) and it constitutes a whole that has magnitude. Tragedy for Aristotle is a performance using speech that allows certain ornamentation. The language of a performance consists of rhythm, harmony and melody, as well as spoken and sung parts. In a tragedy, it is the characters who speak; there is no narrator in a tragedy, because it depicts action, not people. Thus the protagonist’s good as well as bad fortune are based on his own actions. The purpose of life for Aristotle was action, not being (1450a 16–18). Tragic action is presented primarily through plot (*mythos*), character (*ethos*) and thought (*dianoia*).

The plot (*mythos*) is the soul of tragedy. The parts of plot are a sudden turn of events (*peripetia*), a critical moment of recognition (*anagnorisis*) and pity and fear (*pathos*). Aristotle compares a drawing (of outlines) to a plot. The plot of a tragedy reveals that it is necessary or likely for change to come about: “[...] for there is indeed a vast difference between what happens *propter hoc* and *post hoc*.” (1452a 19–20)

The people portrayed in a tragedy are either good or bad. Good and bad are distinguished on the basis of the person’s character (*ethos*). The persons in poems can be better than ourselves, or worse, or much as we are. The characters in tragedy are depicted better and in comedy worse than they are in real life (1448a 1–18). Character-drawing refers to the characteristics that are used to classify people. People are different, based on their character. Aristotle compares the colours (of painting) to character. “In character-drawing just as much as in the arrangement of the incidents one should always seek what is inevitable or probable, so as to make it [...] inevitable or probable that one thing should follow another.” (1454a 33–37)

The character of people in a tragedy is thus set, and it is their actions that determine their happiness or unhappiness. Character is thus an integral part of action. (1449b 23–30 and 1450a 17–20)

1.3 Mimetic Spectacle

Aristotle attaches least importance to the stage set, because “for achieving the spectacular effects the art of the costumier is more authoritative than that of the poet” (1450b 20–21). The rules of stage setting are not, properly speaking, part of poetics. Nor does Aristotle discuss the performance of actors, dance or choreography, because they are all part of the art of theatre. According to Aristotle, the mimetic representation consists only of plot, character and thought (1450a 12–14).⁸⁶ It is through them that tragedy best achieves its purpose.

86 According to Aristotle, the main structural components of tragedy are plot, character and thought. All the six components of tragedy and other elements of mimesis are presented in the diagram inside the back cover of this book.

2. Hamartia and Catharsis

The purpose of tragedy is to evoke feelings of fear (*eleos*)⁸⁷ and pity (*fobos*). By eliciting these feelings, tragedy achieves catharsis, or the purging of these emotions. Catharsis is thus the final goal of tragedy, it is the response to the feelings of fear and pity generated by mimesis and hamartia. The experience of catharsis gives rise to pleasure. It is because of catharsis that we watch tragic plays (or horror movies).⁸⁸

3. The Completeness of Tragedy

The first and foremost thing in tragedy is the structure of events. Tragedy describes action that is complete and has a certain magnitude. A tragedy has a beginning, a middle and an end. The beginning is not necessarily a result of something that would lead to subsequent developments. The end is the result of the preceding actions, and nothing comes after it. The middle follows from something that precedes it, and leads to the subsequent events by virtue of either probability or necessity (1450b 28–34). Aristotle observes: “[...] the plot being a representation of a piece of action must represent a single piece of action and the whole of it; and the component incidents must be so arranged that if one of them be transposed or removed, the unity of the whole is dislocated and destroyed. For if the presence or absence of a thing makes no visible difference, then it is not an integral part of the whole.” (1451a 30–35)

4. Truth and Credibility

Aristotle situates poetry in the sphere of visions and possibility. He writes: “For this reason poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts.” (1451b 5–7). The task of the poet is to tell what may happen, and what is possible, under the principles of probability or necessity. Aristotle adds: “For poetic effect a convincing impossibility is preferable to that which is unconvincing though possible” (1461b 11–13). The reason being that “[...] it is likely that unlikely things should happen” (1461 b 15–16). On the other hand, Aristotle also emphasises that using the names of traditional mythic figures or important events adds to credibility. (1451b 14–16) The structure in poetry must not be the same as in history, where “what is required is an exposition not of a single piece of action but of a single period of time, showing all that within the period befell one or more persons, events that have a merely casual relation to each other.” (1459a 22–25) Tragedy, on the other hand, must be about an action that has been brought to its conclusion. Juha Sihvola⁸⁹ remarks: “In real life, there are only few chains of events that constitute a

whole separate from their environment.” (Sihvola in: Aristoteles 1997, p. 244)

According to Aristotle, the whole of the work and its purpose are best served by representing general truths: “[...] because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts.” (1451b 7–8) Aristotle’s concepts of ‘general truth’ and narration on a ‘general level’ are both complex ideas open to interpretation. According to Aristotle, general truths are used to lend credibility to the plot: “By a ‘general truth’ I mean the sort of thing that a certain type of man will do or say either probably or necessarily.” (1451b 8–9)

⁸⁷ The German historian of philosophy Friedrich Ueberweg (1826–1871) has further defined the meaning of Aristotle’s term ‘fear’ in this context: it is *sympatische Furcht*, sympathetic fear, mentioned in *De anima III* (Aristotle <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.html>), not fear for oneself, which according to Ueberweg has nothing aesthetic about it. (Ueberweg 1869, p. 59)

⁸⁸ The meaning of the word cannot be fixed with certainty. Sometimes its interpretation had a moral connotation (redemption), sometimes it was considered ‘intellectual survival’. Ueberweg seen catharsis as (spiritual) recovery: “By awakening certain movements of the mind [especially using inspirational sacred songs – D. Z.], catharsis leads to release or purification, relief and calm, and is followed by a sense of pleasure.” (Ueberweg 1869, p. 58) For a long time, research on catharsis was dominated by the idea of a kind of medical purgation. In this view, catharsis functions in a way analogous to a purgative, which leaves the body together with the illness-inducing substance. In music and other forms of art, catharsis works by releasing people of certain affects through the stimulation of those same affects. According to this analogy, the stimulated emotion finds a natural release, leading to closure, and the need to feel similar emotions vanishes (temporarily).

⁸⁹ Juha Sihvola (1957–), philosopher and historian.

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Aristotle's *Poetics*: mimesis, hamartia and catharsis,

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