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## 2.5 Artistic thinking and societal change

JAANA ERKKILÄ-HILL

The meaning of art has changed through centuries and even during the past decades. Some of the old meanings have kept their status quo and new ones have taken their place alongside the old and tried ones. Art has always had instrumental value: as a religious object or ritual, as a sign of wealth, as a mean to demonstrate, to make a statement, as a sign of belonging to a certain group or class, in everyday design of domestic items and so forth. Even the absence of art carries a meaning. Art unites and it divides people. Art is active; it works on us.

Joseph Beuys wrote his famous words 'Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler' (Every Man is an Artist)<sup>1</sup> in 1975. He did not claim that all of us could or even should be artists producing art works, but that everyone could participate in constructing and contributing to the social modelling of a society. This approach is often referred to as artistic thinking in our time. Artistic thinking can also be understood as a process of thinking through making in music, literature, visual arts and performance. It can also be seen as a capacity to build imaginative worlds, to live in a world of impossible possibilities that lead a way to societal change. Whereas creative thinking or design thinking claim to find solutions and answers for practical problems, artistic thinking has a capacity to unveil hidden questions. Artistic thinking can identify a problem that we did not recognize or were unable to be aware of.

Alva Noë writes about art as strange tools (2015). According to his view art is a philosophical practice and he says that one way to think about something is to look at it and pay attention to it. Paying attention, trying to understand something that feels strange, alien to our everyday life, can open new insights and make us to question our old ways. Through works of art, I ask myself if there was a new way of constructing reality, making sense of something unexpected and unknown?

For me art and artistic thinking is about thinking the impossible or unspeakable and to make it communicable through various means. We are dealing with the realities of imagination and that is what makes a change possible. If we can imagine a different world, we can also make it happen. My research is about implementing artistic thinking in society and seeing present challenges in a new light. Patricia Leavy (2013) argues strongly for using fiction as research practice. Going back in time we can refer to Mircea Eliade and Edmund Husserl both of whom have argued that fiction often reveals new knowledge from more unexpected angles than arguments based in so called 'hard evidence'. Through fiction and artistic expression in its multiple forms we can reveal knowledge that would be hard, even impossible to reach by any other means.

The current state of the world needs art and culture for building bridges and changing attitudes towards more inclusive and understanding collaboration between people from different walks of life. There is a need to have another view on idea of economic growth and how we share resources. We also need to rethink the relationship between human and non-human world.

## How to live together

I have been fascinated by ideas of Anne Conway (1631–79), who was one of the few seventeenth-century women who was able to study philosophy. She was associated with the Cambridge Platonists, particularly Henry More. Her only surviving text *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* was published posthumously and anonymously in 1690. She argued strongly against the cartesian view of seeing body and mind as separate things.

Conway's metaphysics is an ontology of three kinds of being, which she calls species. I am especially interested in her third species that includes all human and non-human animals, plants, minerals, everything and anything. She claims that we all are of same origin and of the same substance. I quote her: 'yea, daily experience teaches us that Species of diverse Things are changed, one into another, as Earth into Water and water into air and air into fire .....and also stones are changed into metals and one metal into another ... and in animals, worms are changed into flies ... and so on, and in the end a human is changed into earth' (quoted in Hutton, 2021).

I would like to emphasize our unity, our being all of the same substance with the whole universe. When we abuse one part of the whole, whatever Thing it is, our fellow humans, the non-human world, we attack ourselves and it is difficult to mend wounds, to wipe away scars.

Spoken language is often hard to understand and easy to misinterpret. Too often we follow the famous words by Wittgenstein: '*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen*' (Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent) (1922: 162). Art can speak about things that are too difficult to communicate in any other ways. Through our bodies, our senses we can interact with Things that do speak different language from us. We can talk to non-human worlds, and we can listen to the dust of the earth and try to understand what it can tell us about worlds beyond our imagination.

I have had an opportunity to visit old Icelandic Turf houses (Figure 2.5.1.) during a research project *Turfiction* led by Tinna Grétarsdóttir and Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson from the University of Iceland. A traditional turf house has two faces: a front that looks like any other wooden house with gabled roof, a door with windows on both sides. But when you go around the house and approach it from behind there is another world facing you. The house has nearly disappeared into landscape under grass, and only tiny windows indicate that there must be a constructed dwelling underground. And when you enter the house, you step into a living organism that makes it very difficult to regard yourself anything else but a part of 'one species of diverse Things' as Anne Conway expressed our unity with all the natural world. A turf house is a strange environment where you are swallowed by earth in the corridors that combines different parts of the house, and when entering diverse rooms like a



Figure 2.5.1 Turf house in Iceland. 2022. Photo: J.Erkkilä-Hill.

bedroom, kitchen, workshop which are panelled, you come back to familiar human space. Layers of turf and stones in the walls of the corridors and behind the wooden panels are inhabited by little creepy-crawlies, and spiders are watching when a fly is trapped in a net, ready to be eaten. As a human I could be digested by the house and disappear for good. It is not a frightening but rather a reassuring feeling. According to Tinna Grétarsdóttir and Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson the turf house is a form of architecture that is at once human and non-human, co-produced and cohabited (2020).

A turf house demonstrates in a very practical way how our lives are connected both with a human-constructed world but also with natural world that we are a part of whether we want it that way or not. A turf house shows a way to work together with nature, not on it or against it, but with it. Being inside a turf house raises questions about how to live together, how to share a space with creatures that feel strange to us. Tinna Grétarsdóttir and Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson call Icelandic Turf house a super-organism, a multispecies assemblage of entangled roots, lichen, soil, fungi, mycelium, microbes, stones, wood, insects, cows, sheep, dogs, humans, to name few (Figure 2.5.2.). One can experience a turf house as a space of heritage of the past but also as a space for the future. Looking into a turf house does not mean to approach something primitive and shameful in the past, but to revisit old ways of understanding how everything is interdependent in our universe.

A question of survival has become very real and timely for a big part of the natural world that includes humankind. Our biggest challenge is our resistance towards living together

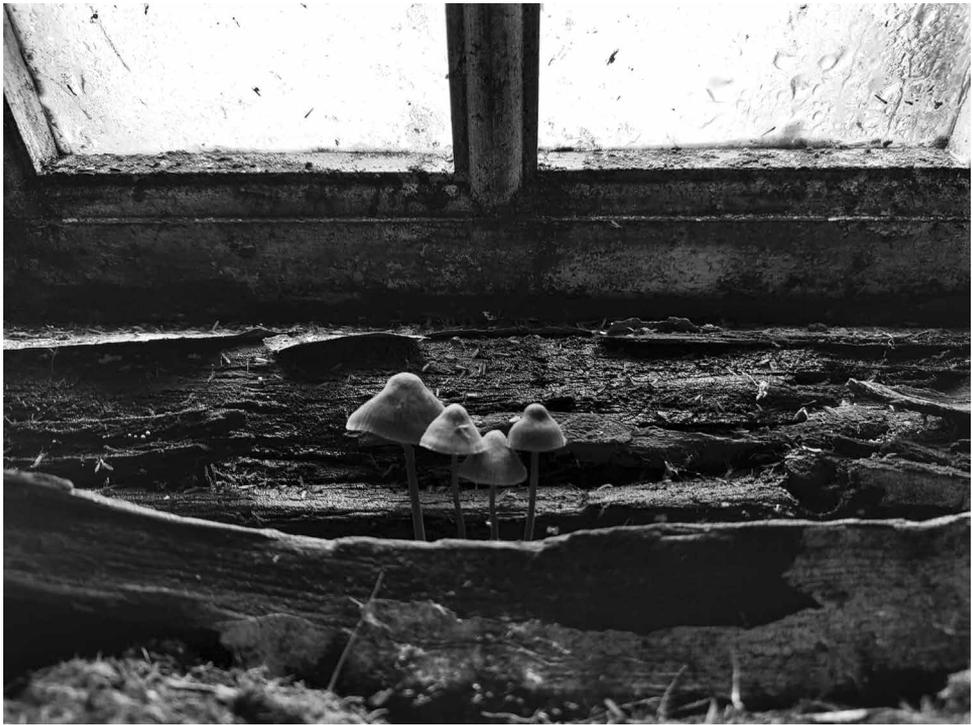


Figure 2.5.2 Window in a turf house. Iceland, 2022. Photo: J.Erkkiä-Hill.

with anybody who happens to share our space uninvited. People in the richest countries are most selective and discriminating what it comes to choosing your neighbours. Selectiveness does not only apply to other human beings but also to animals and even landscapes. Some live rather with a chosen animal than with another human who does not feel familiar in their habits and values. We prefer one animal to another and one type of flora to a different one. Halldór Laxness writes in his novel *Under the Glacier*: ‘This is the dilemma I have now reached at Glacier. I ask: 1) Is it morally right to kill flies, taking all things into consideration? 2) Although it may in certain circumstances be excusable, for instance if flies are proved to be carrying disease into the house, is it still morally right for a guest to kill these creatures? Would that not be comparable to killing the host’s dog?’ (2004, 28). Through fiction he tackles the question of regarding one creature as more valuable than another one. The narrative deals with attitudes towards unexpected behaviour, a priest choosing to focus on practicalities of neighbouring farmers instead of keeping up with church services. People in Laxness’ novel make their own choices and don’t think too highly of authorities.

If I take Conway’s philosophy seriously and regard myself being of same species as whatever Thing in the natural world, and if I put the same value on my beloved dog and an irritating insect that speeds away from daylight, I cannot but rethink how to live together and tackle the issue of keeping warm and fed in these uncertain times. I might have no other alternative but to turn to my fellow species-creatures.

## Art works

The world is still struggling with Covid and its new variants. Southern Europe, especially Greece and Italy, is facing an increasing crisis of asylum seekers who are fleeing difficult and unbearable circumstances caused by climate crisis, wars and poverty. The current war in Ukraine is causing threat of hunger in countries that have relied on imported grain, and there is likely to be more refugees reaching Europe in the coming winter 2023, not only because of war activities in Ukraine and other countries but because of starvation in countries caused by the lack of food supplies. We are faced with an urgent question how to live together with strangers. How to see ourselves in our fellow creatures who look different from us, who see us as strangers? And are we going to receive number of non-human refugees as well? When the United States and the UK withdrew troops from Afghanistan in 2021 we saw for the first time a group of rescue dogs and cats evacuated with fleeing humans from a war zone. Pen Farthing managed to rescue sixty-seven staff members, ninety-four dogs and sixty-seven cats from Kabul. He was strongly criticized for putting animals before humans, but if we think that we all are of same origin there is no reason to think that a dog or a cat is less valuable as a living being than a human.<sup>2</sup> The question becomes difficult and complicated when we really have to make a choice between human and non-human animals.

Professor Ang Bartram from the University of Derby is an artist and artistic researcher. Her research focuses on documentation as an act of ephemeral art process, and with animality and empathy (as acted and/or intuitively behaved) in human–animal companion-species



Figure 2.5.3 Reading to dogs. Photo: Ang Bartram.

relationships. The research with companion species is specifically with dogs (and more recently horses and cats) and the critical and social contexts in which they have relevance. Through video works, photographs and sculptures Bartram tackles the question of relationship between human and non-human animals in a way that would be hard in any other means but through works of art.<sup>3</sup> Her work is fun and serious at the same time. Do we share our love for art with our animal companions? (Figure 2.5.3.) Do we expect them to experience the same excitement as we? Does it make a difference to horses when a human is reading aloud for them? Bartram's art and artistic research challenge the way we think about intelligence, ownership, emotions, feelings of belonging, value of life among other creatures. Bartram (2022) calls animals companion species. She has said about her approach:

*I am interested in a series of ethical 'co's', of being para both in position, significance and level of (being able) to input, when engaging animals in artistic research and its collaborative potential. These co's, two of which have already been mentioned, co-laborative and co-mpanion, and are the most significant in the construct of the ethical position. For, I follow Haraway in that there are two companions in a relationship, and each has to be given and afforded equal importance – this is in terms of contribution, direction and artistic potential. This relates to all sites and circumstances: in the home, the gallery, the research project, the relationship, all collaborators are given the right to be as active as they wish, irrespective of species and perceived capabilities. Non-humans flourish given the right and agency, and true companionship allows that to exist.*

Through artistic thinking we can move from seeing animals as 'them' in comparisons to 'us', and so there is no reason to prioritize the needs of 'us' before the needs of animals since we all belong to 'us'. Martin Buber (1923/1999) wrote about how we make differences by using words. He argues that when we divide living creatures into I /us and he/she/it/them instead of using I and Thou, we enable othering, making the other one into a stranger. Buber was referring humans, but I want us to widen his ideas into all living things. We talk often about extended family; I want to talk about extended understanding of species. That phenomena can be discussed through art. By reflecting on the works by Ang Bartram we can ask ourselves do we encounter Thou in our animal companions or are we looking at them. And what has all this to do with the question of how to live together? (Figure 2.5.4.)

Alain de Botton and John Armstrong (2013) make a list of different ways of looking at works of art and addressing diverse problems of everyday life through reflecting on the works. Their approach mainly concerns human issues, for example, loneliness, relationships, death, etc. Alva Noë and Botton and Armstrong have very similar idea when it comes to art and how art works. Noë refers to art as strange tools, and when there is a tool there needs to be someone to use it. de Botton and Armstrong see art more as therapy when we make new and individual interpretations of it, and when we direct our questions in a certain way. The contemporary tendency in relation to art has moved away from an art historical context towards free interpretations according to the viewer's needs. The intention of an artist seems to be uninteresting to Noë, Botton and Armstrong, and they are not alone in their view. Art is more important than the one who has created the work if the creator is a professional artist. But when a creator is Everyman, she/he/they become more important than the work: emphasis is on the process and what happens to the creator during the process. The outcome in itself may be without any value to an outsider but extremely valuable to the



**Figure 2.5.4** Be your dog. Photo: Dom Moore.

one who has made it. I think that it is crucial to recognize these two different ways in which something we call art is created and how it is used. We can focus on the process and the maker. Or we can emphasize the work of art itself and forget about the maker. Both ways are valuable but have different impacts on the individual and societal levels.

My proposal is to recruit artists and art educators to work with all of us. I still believe that professional artists are needed despite an increasing agency of Everyman when it comes to making and interpreting art. Art cannot solve a housing problem or the production of food and raw materials but through the means of art we can create new visions of what could be possible. Using socially engaging art as a means to communicate and to create understanding between strangers is a start. Artists cannot replace social workers or healthcare professionals, but artists are able to create alternative approaches to everyday life. The question is not only how we work on art, but how art works on us. Art can work on us in unexpected ways. I have worked years ago with different groups of people with special needs that could have been understood as a need to learn a new language, to integrate into a new culture, to cope with children's behavioural challenges and so forth. I also have experiences of artistic interventions in work-places to promote innovative thinking and well-being at work. Art has worked as a means to bring out cultural differences and on the other hand art has revealed what we have in common among strangers. Encountering art can lead us to creative well-being and open us to intuitive knowledge. All of us have experienced situations when we just know something without being able to explain why and how we know it. Creative well-being could be defined as something achieved through intuitive knowledge that is a private awareness of one's innermost being. According to Chuang-yuan Chang in the sphere of intuitive knowledge there is no separation between the knower

and the known; the subject and object are one and the same (2011: 68). Intuitive knowledge cannot be transmitted and explained in ordinary intellectual and reasoning ways. This is a question of artistic thinking and the experiential knowledge that is gained through arts-based activities, or sudden wakening to deep understanding through experiencing art (Erkkilä-Hill, 2017).



Figure 2.5.5 Falling. Jaana Erkkilä, 2022. Photo: J.Erkkilä-Hill.

## To fall and fly

The reason we need professional artists is that they are open to risks, to playfulness and accepting the unexpected. Artists are ready to fall and fly, and this is something that everyone should learn (Figure 2.5.5.). We must recognize that a work of art does not happen accidentally and that not everyone is capable of creating something that speaks to another being's condition. Making needs practice whether it is skill to master an instrument or skill to think out of the box. Artistic thinking happens when there is no expectation for a predetermined outcome. If you are on your way to look for the miraculous you are bound to get lost and then find your way again, hopefully. Encountering art might give you courage to risk falling and eventually finding your wings to fly.

One of the most important personal experiences in art for me was an encounter with the work by Bas Jan Ader in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1988. His art has worked on me over thirty years. I will never forget the moment when I entered a room and saw a man crying in a film screened on a back wall of the exhibition room. The title of the work was *I am too sad to tell you*. There was nothing else in the room, just a crying man (the artist himself) and the title text. The works that spoke most strongly to me were about fallings. The artist is falling from the roof of his house in California; he is falling into a canal in Amsterdam; he is falling here and there and everywhere. Bas Jan Ader has taught me about falling and getting up more than any modern self-help book written by consultants and psychologists making money on people's vulnerabilities and anxieties to deal with shortcomings and mistakes. He has demonstrated through his films and photographs how easily we fall, and how there is no other way but climb up again, sometimes crawling, but still moving on.

Learn to fall, learn to fly. Two elements of artistic thinking that can have a power to make a change in our societies.

## Notes

1. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/beuys-joseph-beuys-every-man-is-an-artist-ar00704>.
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-essex-59652240>.
3. <http://www.angelabartram.com/>.

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### Online resources

- <http://www.angelabartram.com/920/be-your-dog-karst-plymouth-2016/>.
- <http://www.angelabartram.com/1087/human-school-be-your-dog-at-animals-of-manchester-mif-2019/>.
- <http://www.angelabartram.com/1040/reading-animal-theory-to-animals/>.
- <http://www.basjanader.com>.
- <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/conway>.
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