

# Greeting the other within myself

Moira Pikaart

Een briefwisseling tussen mijn verschillende zelf-posities in een zoektocht naar de relaties tussen mijn zelve en mijn zelf, de ander, de buitenwereld en de kunst.

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*'There is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and others.'*

Michel de Montaigne  
(1533-1592)

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*Through the medium of writing letters from different stances and perspectives within myself, using various philosophers, artists, thinkers, and historians as a theoretical basis, I explore the existing internal contradictions, tensions, and conflicting voices within myself, linking them to the external struggle between different individuals, classes, cultures, and parts of the world. Taking Hubert Hermans' dialogical self theory as a starting point, my letters serve as an attempt to structure and clarify my inner turmoil and distill form it several clear-cut self-positions, each with their own voice, their own wants and needs, their own views and ideas on who they are, on what it means to be human and to exist in this world, and on what role they envision for art. Throughout the letters, the contrasts and differences between these self-positions become evident, as well as their common grounds, and each refers to one or several existing theories to support their views, causing their dialogue to reflect existing tensions and ideas out in the world. It becomes clear that what these internal and external struggles have in common is that they center around fault lines where the 'self' and the 'other' meet and come into contact with one another. It's these meetings with the perceived 'other' that are often experienced as confrontational, prejudiced, and even violent, whether the other is encountered out in the world or as an internalized voice within ourselves. Living within a contextualized society that is becoming increasingly globalized and polarized, the encounter with the other has become unavoidable but remains embedded within a history of violence, exclusion and oppression, the traces of which are still alive today. The questions that are central to the letters that form the research basis for this theoretical reflection are: how can we prepare ourselves for the encounter with the other, how can we develop ourselves in ways that we recognize and embrace the otherness within ourselves and can open ourselves up to others without feeling threatened by them and through this become capable of shaping the dialogue with the other into constructive, non-violent, and meaningful encounters?*

*Sleutelbegrippen: dialogische zelf, meerstemmigheid, multiperspectiviteit, tegenstrijdigheid, het zelf en de ander.*

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## ZELFPORTRET

Het zelfportret in verschillende media vormt de afgelopen jaren de rode draad in mijn werk. Deze zelfportretten tonen vaak niet een eenduidig beeld van mijzelf, maar een duale tegenstelling tussen twee uitersten die met elkaar in conflict zijn. Hoewel mijn werk veel op mijzelf gefocust blijft, voel ik juist ook de drang mij te verhouden tot de wereld buiten mij, waarin ik ook vooral de spanningen en bestaande conflicten in de wereld en tussen mijzelf, de ander, en die wereld interessant vind. In deze theoretische verdieping probeer ik de link te leggen tussen de tegenstellingen en wrijvingen binnen in mijzelf en die die ik waarneem in de wereld om mij heen. Door middel van een briefwisseling waarin ik de verschillende stemmen binnen in mij aan het woord laat komen over de kunst, het mens-zijn en de ontmoeting met de ander, tracht ik grip te krijgen op mijn turbulente binnenwereld en te onderzoeken hoe die binnenwereld met haar omgeving is vervlochten.

Tijdens mijn onderzoek ben ik tot verscheidene inzichten gekomen met betrekking tot mijzelf, mijn eigen werk en mijn ideeën over kunst en haar rol in de samenleving, en die inzichten heb ik ook kunnen verwerken in mijn eigen kunstenaarspraktijk, of is het kunststudentpraktijk? Daar waar ik eerst moeite had met de inconsistenties en tegenstrijdigheden die ik in mijzelf tegenkwam, heb ik nu geleerd dat ik het beeld dat ik van mijzelf laat zien niet mooier hoeft te maken of glad hoeft te strijken, maar dat ik juist de nadruk mag leggen op dat wat niet synchroon is, en daar waar het schuurt en knelt. Tegelijkertijd zie ik mijn zelf niet langer als een statische dualiteit van twee tegenpolen, maar visualiseer ik nu een zelf als dynamische dialoog van verschillende stemmen die ontstaan, uitdoven en weer terugkomen, waarin afhankelijk van de context waarin ik mij bevind bepaalde stemmen de boventoon voeren. Dit veranderde beeld zie ik ook terug in het zelfportret dat ik gedurende mijn onderzoek heb

geschilderd, dat direct ook zonder aanpassing nodig te hebben, een afspiegeling is van de vele stemmen die samen de wereld vormgeven en zich daarin met elkaar mengen.

## HET ZELF EN DE ANDER

Hubert Hermans en Giancarlo Dimaggio leggen het verband tussen de interne (intieme) wereld van het zelf en de buitenwereld in hun artikel *'Self, Identity, and Globalization in Times of Uncertainty: a Dialogical Analysis'* door het zelf als continue dialoog van verschillende stemmen en posities te visualiseren. Stemmen die zich verhouden tot en onder invloed staan van bestaande stemmen in de buitenwereld en door het proces van globalisatie vaker geconfronteerd worden met stemmen en perspectieven die als 'anders' worden ervaren. Deze confrontaties kunnen ertoe leiden dat bestaande interne conflicten en spanningen intensiveren en dat het zelf externe stemmen internaliseert en inbouwt tot interne zelf-stemmen die binnen het zelf de dialoog verder aangaan. Hermans beschrijft het risico dat het zelf verward raakt door de kakafonie van contrasterende stemmen of dat eerdere, meer 'vertrouwde' zelf-posities in de verdediging schieten en proberen de nieuwe 'vreemde' stemmen het zwijgen op te leggen, met een monoloog en vervreemding tot gevolg waarbij de vrije dialoog wordt verhinderd. Deze 'antireacties' op stemmen die als 'vreemd' of 'anders' worden ervaren vinden niet alleen plaats binnen in het individu maar ook op maatschappelijk niveau, wat de ervaren tegenstelling tussen 'wij' en 'zij' vergroot tot een bijna onoverbrugbare kloof.

Judith Butler beschrijft in de introductie van haar boek *'The Force of NonViolence'* hoe de termen 'zelf' en 'ander' politieke betekenis krijgen zodra zij worden gebruikt om mensen op te delen en hen bepaalde rechten en machten toe te kennen of juist te onthouden. Butler beschrijft hoe bepaalde groepen mensen, doordat zij door de staat of de overheid worden gezien en beschreven als 'niet behorend bij het 'zelf' van de staat' actief worden uitgesloten van bijvoorbeeld het recht op zelfverdediging. Door deze groepen mensen niet tot het collectieve 'zelf' toe te laten, wordt elke poging die zij ondernemen om zich te verdedigen tegen de onderdrukking en uitsluiting die zij ondervinden door de staat, bestempeld als enkel 'geweld', 'dreiging voor de openbare orde' of 'agressie' en wordt juist het preventieve geweld van de staat onderstrept als zelfverdediging tegen hypothetische dreiging 'van buitenaf'. Op deze manier wordt bepaalde 'zelden' die minder bij het 'maatschappelijk zelfbeeld' passen, geweld aangedaan en wordt hun de kans ontnomen zich tegen dat geweld te verdedigen, omdat het begrip 'zelfverdediging' niet op deze 'niet erkende zelden' van toepassing is. Butler beschrijft in haar tekst hoe de meerstemmigheid binnen de samenleving in gevaar komt wanneer de dialoog wordt overgenomen door een monoloog van 'dominante zelden' die andere zelden uit gemarginaliseerde groepen doen stilzwijgen en op die manier naar de achtergrond drijven, waar hun stem niet gehoord wordt. Ditzelfde is wat Hermans en Dimaggio in hun artikel over het dialogische zelf en globalisering beschrijven als 'antireactie': een overbezorgde verdediging en versterking van het zelf in reactie op de ander op individueel of maatschappelijk niveau.

Dat de spanningsvelden op individueel en maatschappelijk niveau elkaar versterken en kunnen leiden tot geïnternaliseerde onderdrukkende stemmen, is iets wat ook Frantz Fanon beschrijft in de introductie van zijn boek *'The Wretched of the Earth'*. In deze tekst onderstrept Fanon dekolonisatie als een van nature gewelddadig fenomeen, een globaal, maatschappelijk en individueel proces, waarbij niet alleen de gekoloniseerde bevolkingsgroepen zich verzetten tegen de overheersende macht, maar ook individuen zich moeten ontworstelen aan de dominante stem van de kolonisten, die zij na jaren van onderdrukking en aangeleerde inferioriteit hebben geïnternaliseerd. Net als Butler ziet Fanon een patroon waarbij de dominante groep andere groepen mensen binnen de koloniale samenleving systematisch hun menselijkheid en daarmee ook hun gelijke rechten afneemt. Maar in tegenstelling tot Butler, die pleit voor geweldloosheid, vindt Fanon dat de gekoloniseerde mens zich enkel met geweld van het koloniale systeem kan bevrijden, omdat geweld de enige taal is die de kolonist spreekt in relatie tot de inheemse bewoners.

De spanningen en breuklijnen die zowel binnen het zelf als binnen de samenleving zichtbaar worden tijdens ontmoetingen tussen ons 'zelf' en de 'ander', werpen de vraag op hoe we hiermee om moeten gaan in een wereld die steeds kleiner lijkt te worden en waarin steeds vaker verschillende mensen en culturen zich met elkaar mengen en met elkaar in contact komen. Hoe kunnen we ons idee van 'zelf' zo ontwikkelen en vormen dat zij ook de ander binnen in haar toelaat en omarmt en samen met de ander een nieuw collectief zelfbewustzijn vormt, om bepaalde 'antireacties' en preventieve, buitensporige vormen van 'zelfbescherming' te voorkomen? Tegelijkertijd verhouden we ons tot een geschiedenis en een context waarin mensen eeuwenlang zijn onderdrukt, vervolgd, en hen allerlei geweld is aangedaan en moeten wij manieren vinden ons te plaatsen binnen deze context in de wereld en het heden vorm te geven zonder het verleden te vergeten.

In het artikel *'Termen, Stemmen, en Perspectieven'* van Frank van Vree en in Kitty Zijlmans afscheidsrede *'Van Kunstgeschiedenies naar World Art Studies: de Wereld op zijn Kop'* geven Van Vree en Zijlstra los van elkaar antwoord op deze en andere vragen die Butler in haar tekst bij ons oproept. Hoe creëren we wel ruimte voor de stemmen en perspectieven die traditioneel onderdrukt en genegeerd zijn door het koloniale, kapitalistische patriërchaat en hoe zorgen we voor een constructieve, dialogische verslaggeving van de (kunst-)geschiedenis? Zijlmans en Van Vree pleiten beide voor een meer inclusieve weergave van de geschiedenis en kunstgeschiedenis, waarin de verschillende kanten van de geschiedenis worden belicht en de vaste 'canon' plaatsmaakt voor de stemmen, perspectieven en ervaringen van diverse groepen mensen.

Van Vree en Zijlmans onderstrepen de menging van culturen die de samenleving en de geschiedenis vormt en die volgens Hermans en Dimaggio ook optreedt binnen het individu en de innerlijke dialoog van het zelf beïnvloedt. Deze interculturele relationaliteit speelt ook een rol tijdens onze ontmoeting met de ander. In Eva Kittay's *'Learning from My Daughter: The Value and Care of Disabled Minds'* pleit Kittay voor een zorgethiek die begint vanuit het relationele zelf en waarin de zorg voor en de relaties met anderen centraal staan. Kittay schrijft vanuit de feministische kritiek op onder andere de Kantiaanse ethiek die juist het autonome, onafhankelijke zelf centraal stelt, wat volgens veel feministische denkers geen recht doet aan de interpersoonlijke relaties die een fundamenteel onderdeel vormen van het individu en veelal de basis vormen voor ethische handelingen. Deze relationaliteit die het zelf haar vorm en morele richting geeft, onderstreept hoe het zelf in verbinding staat met de anderen en de wereld om haar heen en daar bijna niet los van kan bestaan. De ander vormt een fundamenteel deel van ons zelf en ons zelf is opgebouwd vanuit onze relaties met de ander.

De ander als zijnde cruciaal voor ons zelf en de ontwikkeling van ons zelf, ons wereldbeeld en ons morele kompas, is ook iets wat de Franse filosoof Emmanuel Levinas beschrijft in zijn filosofie, die vaak bestempeld wordt als 'de ethiek van de Ander'. De ander speelt een centrale rol in het denken van Levinas en hij beschouwt de ontmoeting met de ander als een kantelpunt waarin de 'vreemdheid', het 'anders-zijn' van de ander aan ons wordt openbaar en ons confronteert met de paradoxale nabijheid en afstand tot de ander. Het gelaat van de ander doet een moreel gebod op ons, het verzoekt ons onze vastgeklonken wereldvisie te herzien en te twijfelen aan dat wat ons altijd zo zeker voorkwam. Het gelaat van de ander is iets wat ontglipt aan al onze pogingen controle op de wereld uit te oefenen en wat ons een 'oneindige verantwoordelijkheid' oplegt in de vorm van morele geboden. (correcte bron terugzoeken!)

Deze verantwoordelijkheid is ook iets wat in het werk van de Franse filosoof Jean-Paul Sartre terugkomt, al wordt deze door Sartre als veel negatiever en bedreigender ervaren. In tegenstelling tot de betekenisvolle ontmoeting met de ander bij Levinas, beschrijft Sartre in *'Being and Nothingness'* (bron checken!) de 'blik van de ander' als een inbreuk op ons zelf. De blik van de ander dwingt ons ons te verantwoorden, maakt ons tot een ding dat wij niet zijn en niet willen zijn, berooft ons van ons eigen, zelfstandige bestaan. Tegelijkertijd is het de aanwezigheid van de ander die ons ook onze oneindige vrijheid afneemt, of deze in ieder geval inperkt, waardoor we gebonden zijn aan morele verantwoordelijkheden ten opzichte van de vele anderen om ons heen. 'De hel, dat zijn de anderen' is de bekende uitspraak van Sartre, waarmee hij zich bijna lijnrecht tegenover Levinas positioneert. Waar de ontmoeting met de ander bij Levinas een wederzijdse uitwisseling en openbaring is, is deze bij Sartre een eenzijdige inbreuk op ons bestaan en op onze vrijheden.

In *'Het zelf als moeder: De Dialogical Self Theory vanuit zwangerschap, zorpraktijken en baarzaam-zijn'* bouwt Inge van Nistelrooij verder op Hubert Hermans' dialogische zelftheorie en bekritiseert ze het beperkte, afgebakende zelf wat ze daarin waarneemt. Van Nistelrooij betoogt dat elk zelf begint in de baarmoeder, waar het verstrengeld is met het zelf van de moeder, wat zij 'verwevenheid-aan-de-grens' noemt en wat voor haar de grenzen tussen het 'binnen' en 'buiten' van het zelf en tussen verschillende zelden op scherp zet. Daarnaast gebruikt ze deze verstrengeling van zelden als een kritiek op 'een ontologie die begint en eindigt bij het ik' en op de dialogische zelftheorie van Hermans, die volgens haar een te sterke focus heeft op het 'ik'. Hoewel ik de kritiek van Inge van Nistelrooij een mooie en zeer waardevolle aanvulling vind op de dialogische zelftheorie, vond ik niet dat Hubert Hermans per se de nadruk legt op de scheidslijnen of afbakening binnen zijn dialogische zelftheorie. In mijn beleving werd juist de fluiditeit tussen de wereld binnen en buiten het zelf en tussen de vele stemmen in deze werelden zichtbaar. Volgens mij biedt de dialogische zelftheorie een heel vruchtbare theoretische grond om uit te putten wanneer we kijken naar de conflicten die vaak ontstaan aan de grensgebieden, de overgangsgebieden tussen zelf en ander, binnen en buiten, eigen en vreemd. Vanuit de kritiek van Van Nistelrooij zou ik zelf ook nog willen aanvullen dat de dialoog in zichzelf een cruciaal moment is, een moment waarop het zelf en de ander met elkaar verweven raken en de grenzen tussen hen vervagen. Wanneer we ons 'ik' beschouwen als zijnde afgebakend door onze huid, dan dringen de woorden van de ander diep ons 'ik' binnen, waar ze in onze hersenen worden verwerkt. Waar begint en eindigt het zelf dan tijdens de dialoog met de ander?

## MIJN ZELVEN AAN HET WOORD

In de brieven knoop ik vanuit het startpunt ‘waarom kunst?’ het gesprek aan met mijzelf en laat ik de dialoog ontstaan tussen de verschillende aspecten en ‘rollen’ van mijzelf. Mijn innerlijke stemmen die in briefvorm met elkaar discussiëren, leggen de tegenstrijdigheden en conflicten bloot die zich binnen in mij afspelen en maken het concept ‘the society of the mind’ uit Hubert Hermans’ dialogische zelf theorie kenbaar. De brieven zijn zowel onderzoek als documentatie en illustreren hoe de meervoudigheid en de fragmentatie in de samenleving de spanningen binnen in het individu kunnen intensiveren.

In mijn brieven ondersteunen de teksten van Judith Butler en Frantz Fanon mijn meer maatschappijkritische stemmen, die vragen – nee, schreeuwen – om verandering en politiek geëngageerde kunst en die ook niet altijd even constructief een bron van zelftwijfel zijn. Anderzijds spreken Kitty Zijlmans en Frank van Vree binnen mij mijn meer hoopvolle stemmen aan, die willen geloven dat wij als leden van een globale community gezamenlijk toe kunnen werken naar een gebalanceerde dialoog, waarin we gewelddadige systemen achter ons laten en ons bevrijden van de dominante stemmen die deze systemen gevormd hebben en in stand houden. Hubert Hermans en Eva Kittay geven een breder overzicht aan stemmen die uit kunnen zoomen en zichzelf kunnen zien als zijnde onderdeel van een dialoog tussen verschillende stemmen die samen één zelf vormen, terwijl de stemmen die voortbouwen op Emmanuel Levinas en Jean-Paul Sartre elkaar bijna direct tegenspreken en zo samen in conflict verwickeld zijn.

De stemmen en ‘ik-posities’ die in mijn brieven aan het woord komen zijn zowel chronologische zelden, zoals mijn ik als kind, mijn ik als kunststudent en mijn ik als bijna stervende, en meer spirituele zelden, zoals mijn ik als vrouw, mijn ik als kunstenaar, mijn ik als mens en mijn ik als onderdeel van een community en van de natuur. Ik probeer in de brieven een spanningsveld te creëren door deze individuele stemmen uit te lichten en te onderzoeken waar de knelpunten zitten en hoe deze verschillende stemmen aankijken tegen de kunst en mijn rol in de wereld. Belangrijk in mijn onderzoek is dan ook de vraag die de link legt naar de externe wereld: hoe zorgen we met elkaar dat we de meerstemmigheid niet verliezen in ons continue gesprek met onszelf en elkaar en welke rol kan kunst hierin spelen?

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## MIJN VERSCHILLENDE ZELF-POSITIES

The self-position of me that is expressed in the letter	The (philosophical) theory that this self-position draws from	The artworks or artists that this self-position relies on
<i>Chronological self-positions</i>		
Me as a child (past)	Art therapy	Hundertwasser
Me as a daughter (past, present)	Inge van Nistelrooij	Janaina Mello Landini
Me as an art student (near past, present)	Anti theory! Thomas Hobbes	No art! Jake and Dinos Chapman Marina Abramovic & Ulay
Me as a potential mother (fear of the near future)	Hannah Arendt (natality)	Louise Bourgeois
Me as a human-tech cyborg (hope for the far future)	Donna Haraway	Mariko Mori
Me as a mortal being (close to death, far future)	Epicurus Jean-Paul Sartre The epic of Gilgamesh	Hieronymus Bosch Different art movements focused on death and mortality
<i>Factual/spiritual self-positions (general to specific)</i>		
Me as an ecological being (part of nature)	Arne Naess (ecological self)	Ana Mendieta Romanticist art movement, human as a small part in nature

Me as a human	Jaap van Praag Hannah Arendt (plurality)	Cave paintings
Me as a woman	Jean Shinoda Bolen	Anita Magsaysay-Ho
Me as a white, Western European (privileged)	Frantz Fanon Sam Gilliam Kitty Zijlmans	La planète sauvage
Me as a part of society (community, the other as constitutional part of my self)	Emmanuel Levinas Fichte (being human only among other humans) Rousseau (freedom in community) Hegel (recognizing the other in myself and myself in the other)	Rirkrit Tiravanija Joseph Boeys
Me as a lonely being (anti community, the other as ultimate threat to my self)	Jean-Paul Sartre	Kara Walker
Me as a political being (part of the political body)	Judith Butler Karl Marx	Ai Weiwei Protest art
Me as a teacher	bell hooks Aristotle	Le Petit Prince
Me as an artist	Iris Murdoch	Tehching Hsieh Vincent van Gogh
Me as a troubled emotional being	Dominique Moisi Frank van Vree	Yayoi Kusama
Me as a dialogical self	Hubert Hermans Dostojevski	Louwrien Wijers
Me as an individual (Moira)	Georg Hegel Hubert Hermans	My own work as a red thread to express my dynamic self and see my different voices change through time

## DE DIALOOG MET MIJN ZELVEN

'Why art?'

- Art student me: No art! Art is shit, just like the art academy and the art world.
- Child me: Art is not shit! Art is beautiful and inspirational, art can be therapeutic.
- Troubled and emotional me: Art can be a constructive way to express intense emotions that would otherwise manifest in negative ways.
- Potential mother me (fear of the future me): This world is scary, it seems there is no hope for the future. Art can give hope in hopeless times, art can be something to hold onto.
- Woman me: Art can serve as a way to help us construct archetypes and visualize the many possible ways we can realize ourselves. Art can ask us 'who am I?':
  - In a class on Religions and Gender, I learned about Hindu goddesses, who are in actuality emanations or manifestations of one and the same mother goddess, who presents herself in different forms, and to me, this demonstrates so beautifully how we exist in a multitude of different selves, every aspect of us unfolding or becoming visible under different circumstances, together forming a society of selves.
  - Eva Kittay: er is een ethiek nodig die begint vanuit het 'relationele zelf' in plaats vanuit het 'autonome, onafhankelijke zelf. Relaties met anderen vormen de grondslag voor veel ethische

beslissingen en zijn een fundamenteel deel van ons zelf, maar dit is in eerdere ethische theorieën niet serieus genomen. In het licht van deze 'relationaliteit' is het dus de ander die ons zelf dus haar vorm en haar morele richting geeft.

- Teacher me: Art can encourage us to change ourselves and 'moralize' us. Art can serve as a moral exemplar and ask us not who we are, but 'who do I want to be?'.
  - o But! Art does not have to show us 'idealized versions' of ourselves or of the world to inspire us! On the contrary, art can also 'shock' us into wanting to actively change or do something, by showing us raw, brutal, unpolished, and sometimes cruel reality, like Mary Ellen Mark and Kevin Carter did through their photography.
  - o Paulsen: the humanities require of us and teach us what it takes to be human among humans
- Political me: Art should not aim at changing the individual, art should aim to change the system! Art can ask us 'who does the system want or force me to be?'.
  - o Marx: only through revolution can we change the system and free ourselves

'Who am I?'

- Dialogical self me: The I is dialogical. Art can serve as a way to develop the different dialogical self-positions and spark the internal debate, helping our 'selves' to stay dynamic and keep engaged in an active dialogue.
  - o Waar eindigt het zelf en begint de ander? Wanneer we stellen dat ons 'zelf' begint en eindigt bij de huid, dan hebben we een probleem: de dialoog met de ander, de invloed van de ander en vooral de woorden van de ander die door onder huid, door de barrière van ons zelf heen breken en het binnendringen tot in de hersenen, waar ze worden verwerkt. Zijn we dan tijdens het dialoog met de ander nog wel onszelf, ons 'eigen zelf', of vormen we dan samen met de ander een symbiotisch geheel zonder duidelijk aan te wijzen grenzen?
- Privileged Western European me: I am a privileged Dutch white woman, my perspective fits the dominant perspective and is shaped by privilege. Art can be a way to integrate new voices and perspectives into the dialogical self and challenge existing dominant positions.
  - o As a white Western European, sometimes I don't know how to continue, and I start to doubt whether I even deserve to live in a world where I only exist in the way I do by means of the toil and violent deaths of many others at the hands of other Western Europeans? How do I continue in such a world, surrounded by such violence and building on the bloody remains of a violent past? Can I? Should I?
  - o Maybe you should use your privilege to help those who don't have it?
- Daughter me: My parents have partly influenced and shaped who I am and continue to do so. My own mom coincidentally gave me the writing of Van Nistelrooij who approaches Hermans' dialogical self-theory from a maternal viewpoint, who also uses the works of Louise Bourgeois to visualize motherhood and connectedness.
- Human me: I am human and experience the world through my humanity, which can be frightening, as my existence can ask me many existential questions that I have no answers to. Art can be a way to cope with human existence and make us think about certain universal questions.
  - o We are all just thrown here into this meaningless chaos and have to figure out for ourselves how we fit into this context of nothingness, with a very human need to want to structure the world and attribute value to it. And within this nonsensical mess, we have to learn how to shape and construct meaning and morality to guide our lives.
- Part of nature me: I am much more than just an individual human being, I am a part of nature, a part of the world. I have an ecological self that needs others for its self-realization. Art as a way to feel connected to the environment. What makes us human, then?

- I wonder why you chose a human artist as a way to visualize our ecological selves? Why should art be confined solely to the realm of humans? Does nature not also produce her own many forms of art?
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau described our human 'civilization' as a corruption of our 'natural way of life', in which he presumed humans lived in balance with nature, while 'civilized societies' dominate nature and lost this natural balance.

'What makes us human?'

- Part of society me: Being in contact with others, interacting with them, it is the dialogue with others that makes me human. Art as a way to spark this dialogue and meet other humans (social sculpture).
  - Hegel: the I that is a We and the We that is an I
- Lonely me: Dialogues are not always peaceful, some are violent. Other human beings force me to be something that I'm not. I cannot escape existence but am burdened with a responsibility that I did not ask for. Art can give meaning and shape to this struggle.
  - How can one ever learn to become human without others to teach him? For German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, we can only become human among other humans, by means of reciprocal activity that cannot occur when we are not among others. Therefore, we cannot be 'human' completely on our own, we need others to become human because according to Fichte, 'humanity only makes sense in the plural'.
  - According to French philosopher Henri Rousseau, we remain free even when we choose to become part of a society, because by all equally surrendering our freedom to others, we gain that same freedom back from the others we form a society with. Rousseau argues this gained freedom is even stronger than the individual freedom we had before, because it is guaranteed and protected by the whole community.
- Narrative me: My ability to narrate and make sense of my own personal story is what makes me human. Art as a way to give shape to that story, to make it recognizable for others and understandable for oneself.
- Mortal me: Being mortal is what makes me human, not the dying itself, but knowing that I will die and that I need to make my life meaningful before death. What makes us human is that we have death consciousness (Sartre and Epicurus). Art as a way to seek meaning in meaningless existence and cope with death (Gilgamesh).
  - Although here you describe 'wanting to escape death' as something very 'human'; but as you well know, I and with me many others, have not so much wished to escape death, but have longed for it, craved it. How can you explain this? Am I (and you then too) not human then? It seems to me, that this death drive or tendency to self-destruct is in fact extremely human, I only have to think of the planet that we ourselves have drove into its current state, while she is crucial to our own survival.
- Cyborg me: What makes us human is that we can probably cheat death (cyborg, etc) Hope (and the human quest to escape the boundaries of our humanity) is what makes me human, having an AI write (part of) this letter? Kitty and Frank on how to shape the artworld and our perspectives on history, art as a way to shape the future, to imagine a future in which we escape the inescapable (tech saves us from man-made destruction?).
  - Right now, there is a fiery debate going on about whether images produced by AI can be considered art and used to enter competitions for artists and many artists feel cheated out of their job it seems. I myself was really surprised by their reaction, mainly because to me, the AI is the artwork in itself, who can only present itself through these images, which can then be used by other artists to incorporate into their work. It seems to me it offers so many new possibilities, mainly for the artists themselves!

- Art student me: Our violence and creativity in finding new ways to inflict pain on others is what makes us human. Our creativity and art are wasted on us, art can only be found on the battle field, the art academy to me is a constant being at war with my teachers, my students, myself, without feeling of connectedness. Paradox of me wanting my art to focus on human connections, yet my art comes to be in a very lonely and unconnected way.
- Artist me: Art makes us human. Art can teach us how to look, how to approach the other with kindness, instead of fear of rejection, and through that, art enables us to connect with the other. Art as a way to practice in a safe way with confrontations and the ideas of other humans, training us to cope with these confrontations in real life. Art can be a way of life, something to hold onto, or something to not go crazy. So why do I keep coming back to art?

'So, why art?'

- Moira me: I am me. And I am all these me's. I am searching and doubting and unsure. And for some inexplicable reason, art gives me the tools to express these doubts and these conflicted feelings. Art to give shape to these different voices within myself, art to give shape to who I am, art to distinguish myself from others while at the same time trying to get close to them and 'reach them' in some way, art to give shape to all the different me's as a way to understand the other. Art to confront me with the otherness in myself to help me overcome the separation between myself and the other. Art to ultimately reflect on myself, by confronting me with the image of myself, making me reflect on myself, as everyone will see the same artwork differently. I think Hegel's recognition could be true for art as well, for art that resonates with us, this kind of art allows us to recognize ourselves in the artwork and recognize some of the message of the artwork in ourselves.
  - We are all thrown into this mess, into the violence of the world without having asked for it and we all have to figure out how we fit ourselves into this (historical) context of violence and how we give shape to our human needs for connection and contact with others within this context.
  - I too, find myself in this world within a context of a long history of human violence. How can I find connection, constructive communication with the other within this context of violence? How can I take these materials, that found their ways to my hands on a colonial path smeared by blood, and create something else, something positive, within all that violence? Can I? Can anyone?

## (ZELF-)ONDERZOEK AAN DE HAND VAN BRIEVEN

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MAASTRICHT, 2022

October 14th

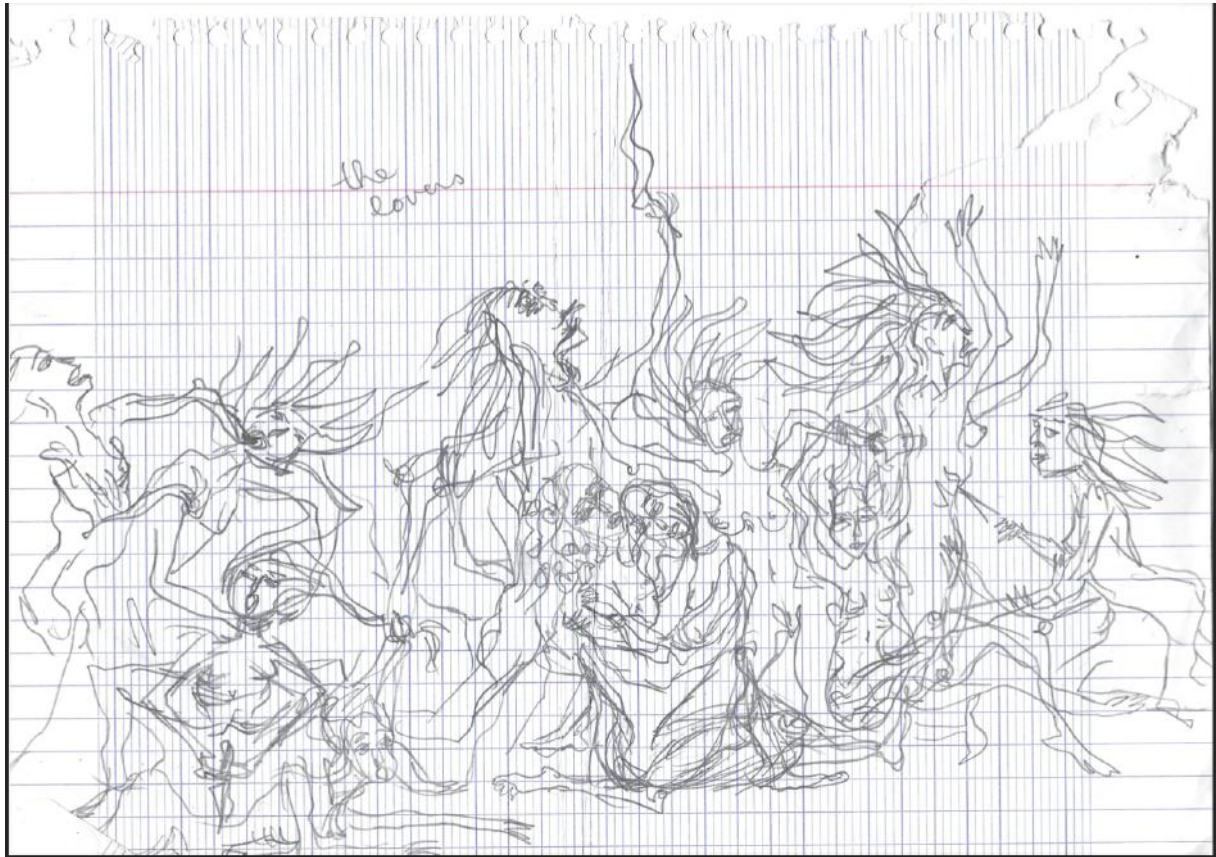
Dear me,

Why art?

Yours, truly,  
Me

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Curaçao, March 2022.

MAASTRICHT, 2021

October 18th

Dear me,

'Why art?'; you ask me, well, I wouldn't know what to say to that. To be honest with you, I have felt more and more repulsed by the whole idea of 'art' during the last three years I spent in the art academy, where I was surrounded with art, both physically and mentally: in my atelier and in my thoughts, speech, actions.

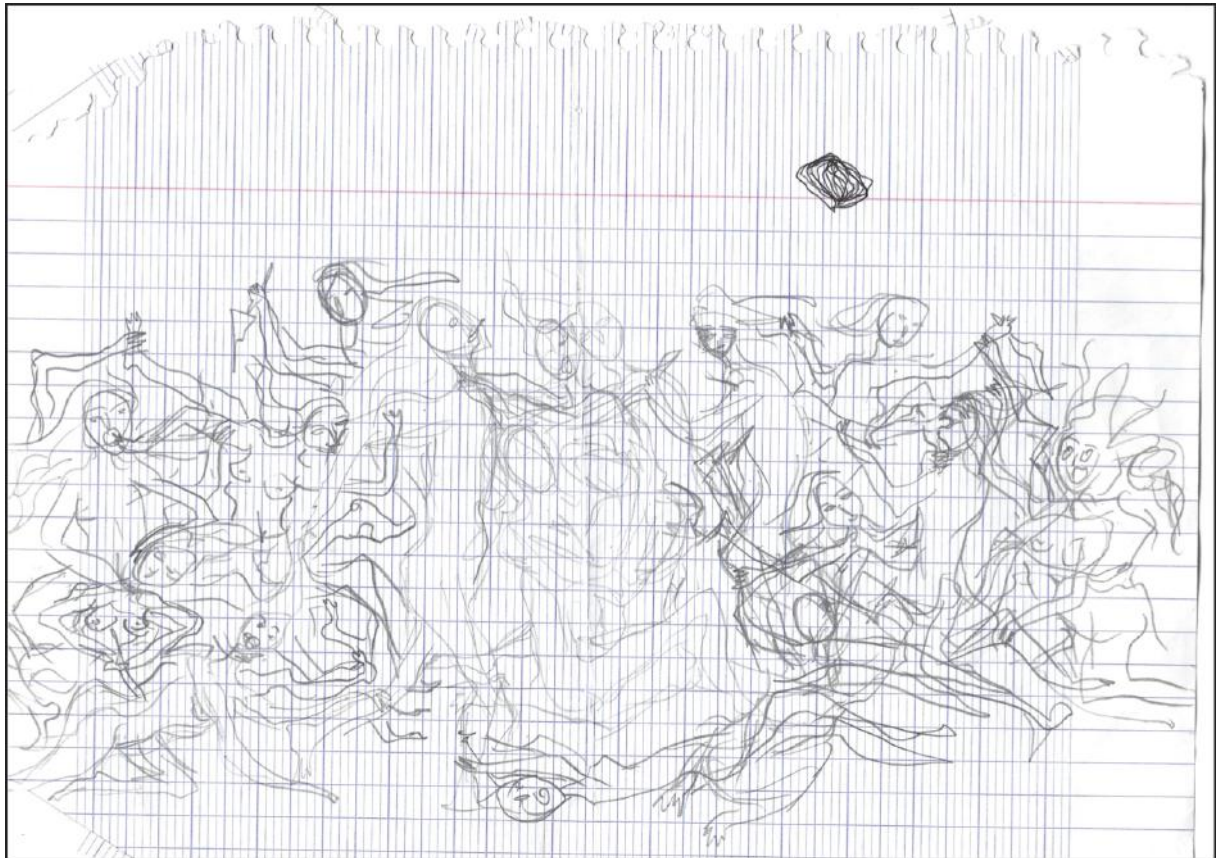
During these years, ~~the complete joke that is~~ 'art' has become the ultimate horror, a thing inherently bound to the countless frustrations and disappointments the academy brought with it and to the disgusting and alarming thing that is the 'art world'; where not the quality of your work, but your 'networking skills' and befriended gallery owners and curators determine what happens to your work, where sexism and racism rule — and the artworks of minorities only get attention to make the artworld fit into a certain trend or make it look like the artworld is devoid of any discrimination — and where the white old man, whose best work consists of some painted sticks lying on the ground and whose girlfriend is less than half his age and used to be his student, is the one you need to befriend...\*

Art has become to me the epiphany of elitist, useless, over-inflated, empty bullshit, and the academy has become a place where I do not feel at ease, ~~where I would rather never come back to~~ where I do not feel taken seriously, where I feel an intense disgust towards art and life. Could I only go back in time and tell naive, hopeful, excited me with great expectations of art and the art academy that she is making the biggest mistake of her life, that she should better become a garbage collector than ~~an artist~~ an art student!

When you ask me 'Why art?'; all I can think about is the current state of 'art' and the 'art world'; where 'art' that's not even beautiful, meaningful, representative, or new, sells for millions while people are starving, where art is only available to the rich, who can afford to buy a ticket to look at old, unoriginal junk in a white cube, where the 'job of the 'artist' has nothing to do with art, but everything with kissing the asses of the right rich people with power. I guess my answer to your question, although it might seem disappointing or even hateful, is clear, and it is: 'No, no  ~~fucking~~ art. Stop this nonsense that is called 'art'; tear down every museum, burn every old or expensive artwork, paint over all Rembrandts and Vermeers, and let's create our own things and take control over our own lives, but may we never call it 'art!'.

\* any resemblance to any living person is entirely coincidental

Me



Curaçao, March 2022.

UTRECHT, 2013

October 25th

Dear me,

Art because art is amazing! Art because it inspires, because it is beautiful and wonderful!

I recently went with my parents and my sister to an exhibition with artworks of the artist and architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser, and I was blown away! Seeing his works, in particular one untitled purple and pink work, inspired me to start painting again, like I used to do when I was around six years old, with my mom and my sister, but at some point we stopped, I don't really know why...

Seeing Hundertwasser's works at the Cobra Museum, I was reminded again of how much I loved painting and of how much I love art. Furthermore, because of his other works that I looked up afterwards, his green houses, organically shaped palaces, buildings that merge with nature, and his painting 'Green Town', I started thinking about this connection between art and nature. My mom said that Hundertwasser had his own philosophy about art, that he thought that through shaping our environment to be more aesthetic, the people living in that environment would also become more mindful of how they lived and behaved in that environment, the aesthetic environment making the people living inside it more 'ethical'. Hundertwasser thought that our straight-lined, grey, lifeless, and joyless architectural surroundings are unfit for humans to live in, and that 'organic architecture', but also art, can help make our environment more 'human' in some way and through this, make us more human as well. I find this absolutely fascinating!

~~Right now~~ In my high school, I follow a subject in which we have to find creative solutions for mostly ecological issues, basing our ideas on research that we do ourselves and realizing our solutions into small scale models. Hundertwasser's works and ideas inspired me a lot for the project that we're working on right now. One thing that is always bothering me when I'm doing something creative, like working on such models for school, is my tendency to want everything perfect, and when it is not perfect, I become very frustrated and upset. This frustration then causes me to make more mistakes and when that happens, I can get unreasonably angry, which is really not nice for anyone. :c



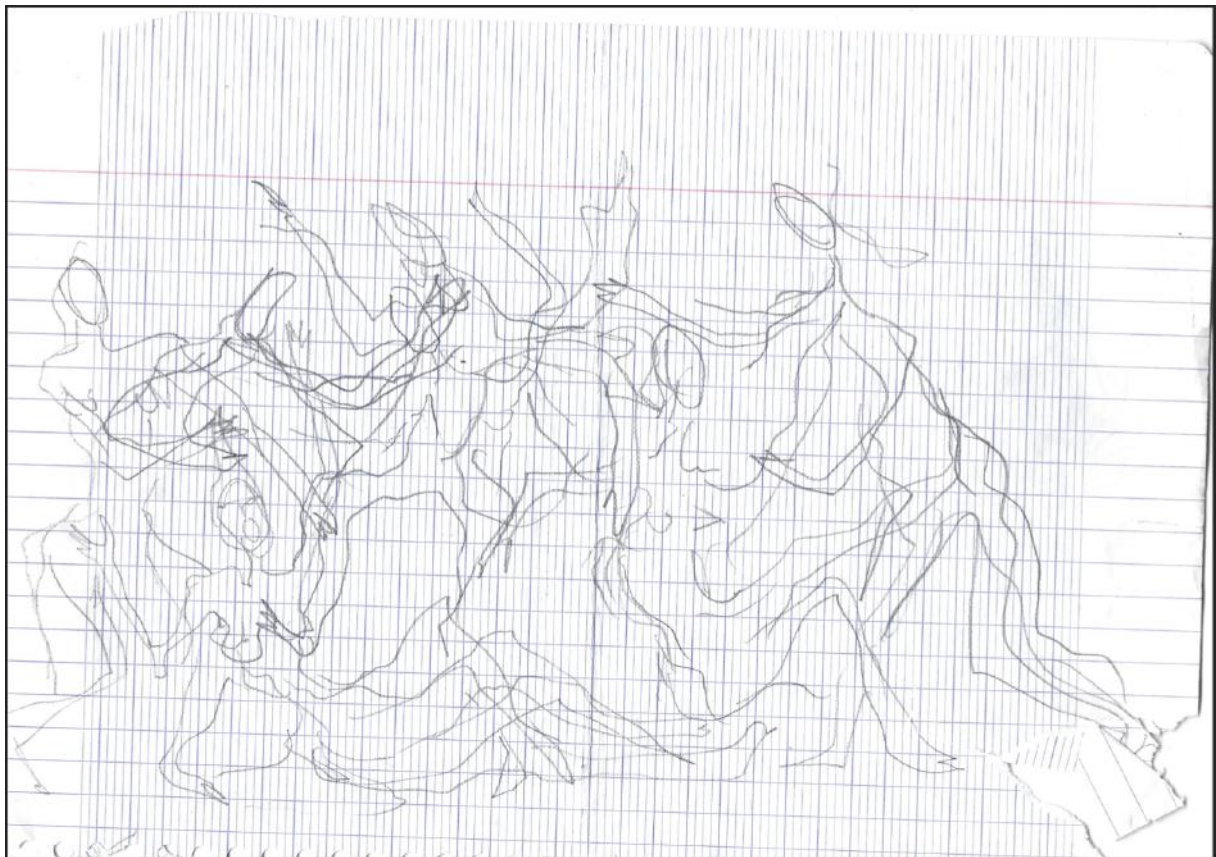
Starting painting again after seeing Hundertwasser's paintings, I was reminded of that art therapy that I had some years ago, when I was ~~still~~ a child. During the therapy I had to make paintings with watercolours while talking to the therapist about my feelings about the painting. The watercolours were meant to make me let go of my perfectionism, because it is really hard to make precise, pretty shapes with watercolours, because the colour just moves around in the water, which is extremely frustrating! I do think it helped me somehow because I had fewer explosions of anger afterwards. When I'm painting nowadays however, I use acrylic paints, like we did with my mom and my sister, because they are less frustrating to work with.

So, when you ask me, "Why art?", I can think of so many reasons, but mainly, I like art because it can be so inspiring and even therapeutic, like I experienced myself in art therapy and in Hundertwasser's ideas on how art can shape people the same way that people shape art.

And I do not think that I'm naive, by the way! Maybe those who call me naive are just disappointed and frustrated with life and in need of some art therapy!!

xoxo

Me



Utrecht, October 2022.

MAASTRICHT, 2022

November 1st

Dear me,

I immediately felt it, when I stepped into this old building with her crooked walls with one thousand layers of paint. I felt ~~my heart race~~ my body tense up and myself getting distraught and anxious. Emotions can be so overwhelming, that I feel sucked into a wild and stormy sea, being pushed around by the waves of different emotions, losing control, giving in to the ebb and flow of the irrational and fast changing waters. Sometimes out of the blue, I feel flooded by strong emotions and all the rest drowns out, until only those feelings remain, colouring everything else, but never staying the same, always changing between extremes...

Political scientist Dominique Moisi writes in the introduction of his book 'The Geopolitics of Emotion' (2010, pp. 1-8) about the role that emotions play on a national and international stage, arguing that fear, hope, and humiliation are expressions of 'national confidence' of nation states and drive certain processes by pushing countries to act from these emotions. Ultimately, these emotions are not felt by these nations or states, but by the human agents involved in those states. These emotions are felt collectively by a whole population of civilians and acted out by human politicians, policy makers, or by the subjects themselves.

In their article 'Self, Identity, and Globalization in Times of Uncertainty' from 2007, Hubert Hermans and Giancarlo Dimaggio argue that emotions are not 'things in themselves within individuals', but that they are influenced and shaped by external factors. They argue that globalisation has emotional implications, because the process intensifies the perceived differences between 'us' and the ~~other~~ many 'others' that exist in the world and have become visible to us. Hermans and Dimaggio observe various emotional responses to this confrontation with the 'other' within the individual and within local groups, that find themselves in a field of tensions between different voices and emotions.

This complexity of sometimes opposing emotions is also mentioned by Frank van Vree in his essay 'Termen, Stemmen en Perspectieven' from 2020, who writes that historical events implicate a wide array of perspectives and associated emotions within various individuals and groups that were affected by the events.

According to Hermans and Dimaggio, the conflicting emotions that collide around the individual, can lead to the same collisions between the internalized voices within the individual, causing confusion and feelings of insecurity.

I think, like one of you wrote before, that art can be therapeutic and can help us understand and make space for our emotions, even when those emotions are conflicting with each other, because art is one of the very few things that does not aim for or require unambiguous clarity. ~~Art is flexible~~ Art, good art (in my opinion) is flexible, open to interpretation and welcomes the doubt, mutability, and the fragmented reality of all the different experiences of different humans, instead of standardizing these unique experiences into one. Both making art and experiencing art can help us learn to navigate the ebb and flow of our emotions, especially because of art's lenient attitude towards ambiguity and chaos.

For Yayoi Kusama, an artist who struggled with hallucinations since her childhood, making art has helped her to streamline her troubles and fears, and through this to cope with her hallucinations, that were so overwhelming at times that she would feel she 'had begun to self-obliterate'. Kusama's art also resembles her hallucinations, emerging the viewer in almost psychedelic experiences, first with her immense paintings of endless 'nets' of dots and later in her all-encompassing 'infinity mirror rooms'. In these infinity rooms, the viewer is confused and unbalanced by the endless night of lights and dots in the mirrors, in which I imagine, the viewer recognizes countless versions of himself, from all angles. To me it seems that such an experience can confront the viewer both with the intensity of one's own emotions from such an experience and with their own multiplicity, as seen in the mirrors. I would like to think that such an experience could help someone understand that a straightforward and uniform clarity is not always needed, but that beauty can also arise from our inner chaos and troubled confusion, like Kusama's art arose from hers.

So, coming to 'the point' — asking myself and you too, whether such a 'point' is even obtainable or desirable when it is derived in her singularity from the 'jumbled multiplicity of thoughts that lead to her birth' — in answer to your question 'Why art?', I would say this: 'Art, because it can help soothe the troubled human being, not by 'straightening it out' or by glossing over those troubles, but by helping us understand that these very troubles, internal contradictions and paradoxical thoughts are very human and don't need to be glossed over. Art can be a constructive way for the maker to express troubling and confusing emotions that might otherwise manifest themselves in negative ways and for the viewer art can help one recognize that this multiplicity of various emotions and inner tensions is common to us all and that it can lead to inspiring art, interesting discussions, personal development, and better understanding of the 'other' through the presence of this 'otherness' in ourselves.'

I recognize this potential to embrace inner turmoil and otherness both in the experiencing and in the creating of art, as I have myself, through art therapy, through discovering unexpected beauty in artworks and through painting during the last three years in the art academy ~~although that did not happen without many inner conflicts and conflicting emotions either.~~

Me

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Utrecht, October 2022.

DISTOPEIA, 2062

November 10th

Dear me,

In this world, that I have witnessed get progressively more and more devoid of any hope, humanity or anything of intrinsic value (as opposed to money, material property, etc...) I feel my generation and all those that came after us, have been stripped of their entire potential, stripped of all hope for any meaningful or liveable future...

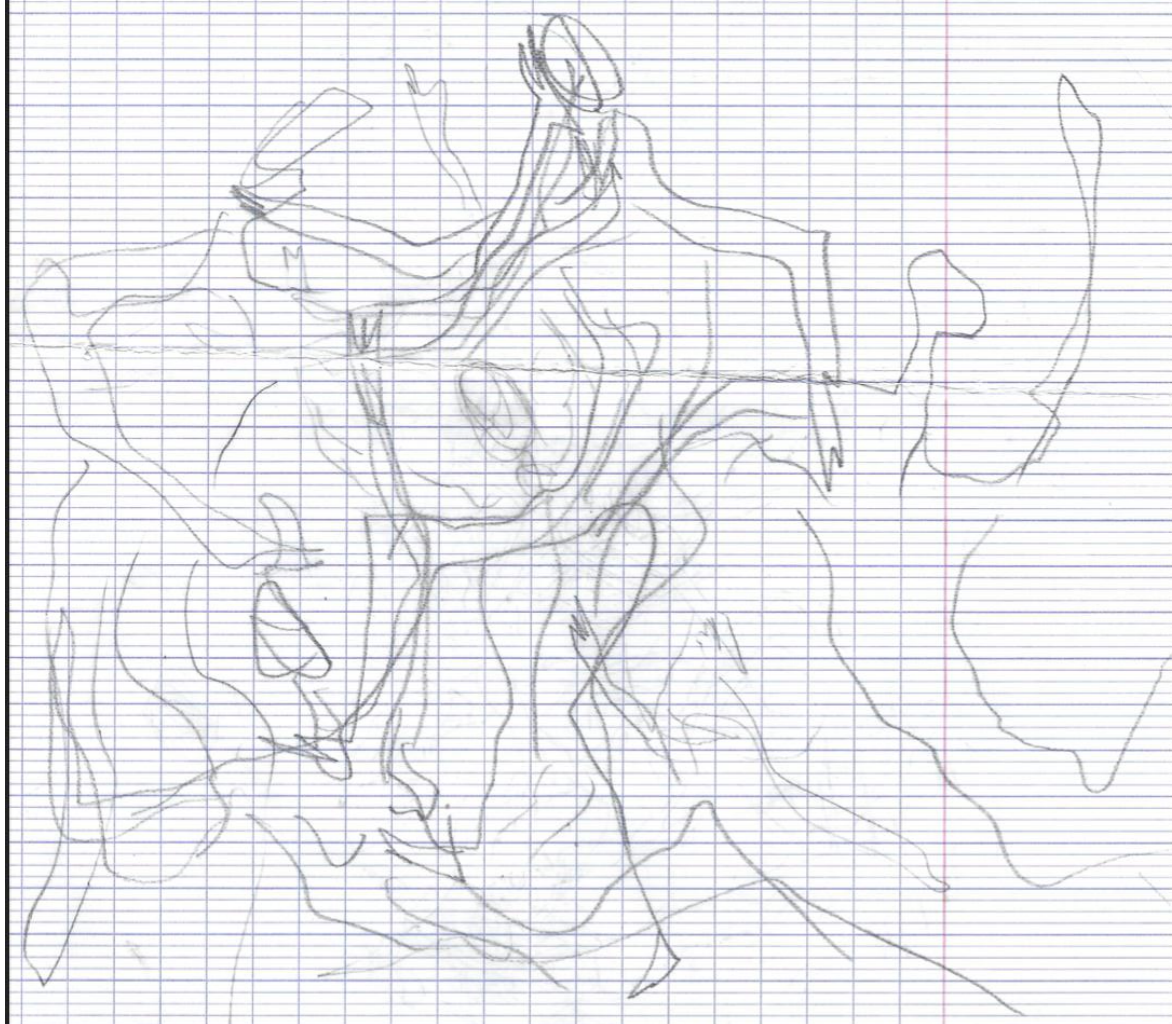
I recognize, when you write in your last letter that you feel that you have become bitter and numb from not being taken seriously by the art academy, that same feeling exists within me and my whole generation, the feeling that we and our futures are not being taken seriously by our political leaders which has us ending up feeling frustrated and desperate. It feels like the whole 'natality' of several generations has been crushed by years of bad, rigid policies. The natality that Hannah Arendt writes about in her book 'The Human Condition' (1958) as the endless source of renewal of the human species that constitutes hope, the possibility of change, of improvement. For Arendt, natality is an important aspect of the human condition that constitutes freedom, which is one of two central features of action, since voluntary action can be understood as the actualization of this freedom, that springs from our natality. The crushing of all hope for the new, for improvement, for a better world, reveals itself in the passivity and the reluctant acceptance of the status quo that I witness within my cohort. This results in our collective feelings of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and depression, which is flourishing among young people everywhere, because of our dissatisfaction with the status of the world, but our overall — although there are exceptions — failure to convert these feelings into action, because of our loss of hope.

I have always felt very conflicted about my own potential to become a mother, and some of my less positive and hopeful thoughts on that matter have definitely been fuelled by my disappointment in both myself and the world around me, and by the feelings of despair that accompany this disappointment. When I saw an exhibition in 2017 in New York with many of the works from Louise Bourgeois, including her giant spider sculptures and many small drawings of pregnant, birthing, and lactating figures, I was struck by them. Not because they painted some beautiful picture of motherhood, but because they depicted that very potential of motherhood that I felt within myself, in such a raw and honest way, while still touching me with the overwhelming beauty that this ~~extremely scary~~ painful and trying part of life implicates.

In some way, seeing Bourgeois' works about her mother and herself as a mother, I felt less alone in my doubts and struggles around a future motherhood, and I felt hope, that I too, could be capable of being a good mother in what is a quite

depressing world, without needing to be perfect. To me, art has the potential to constitute new hope without being overly optimistic about things. And hope is something that humanity very much needs in this world. Especially today.

I hope this letter finds you well.  
Me.



Utrecht, October 2022.

UTRECHT, 2048

November 21st

Dear me,

Being back in my childhood home reminds me of my girlhood that I spent here, and of the womanhood that is tied to my every experience, sometimes positive or neutral, but also negative, when facing the still abundant sexism that seems to be rooted in every aspect of life, from simple dating to walking on the street, from struggling in the art world to every look cast upon me. Being a woman has given me many struggles during my life, not only in regard of society or social interactions, but also within myself. Struggles of being too feminine, or not feminine enough, of letting others walk all over me or being seen as a 'bitch', of learning to cope with my turbulent emotions and being perceived as 'hysterical'... ~~Oh, how I started to hate men and the society they created!~~

In my early twenties, my mom gave my sister and me a book, written by the Jungian psychiatrist Jean Shinoda Bolen, called 'Goddesses in Everywoman' (2014) and it told me a lot about the many different ways that 'womanhood' or 'femininity' can take shape. Some years before, I had read Carl Jung on the archetypes, which I found fascinating and gave me a lot of insight in how certain archetypal plots and figures in the world around us shape how we structure our lives and our own personalities and expectations.



In her book, Bolen takes nine Roman goddesses as the archetypes that she recognizes in most women and one that she describes is the archetype of the archer goddess Artemis, who surrounds herself with nature, animals, and other women, nymphs, with whom she forms a strong sisterhood, far away from men and gods that might desire her. This is an archetype that I think women need, if we are to have any chance at ~~destroying~~ reforming the patriarchy and this is also what came to my mind when I saw the work of the Filipino artist Anita Magsaysay-Ho, whose mesmerizing paintings depict mainly groups of women from the working class, who are gathering fruits together, pushing together, chatting together, or working the field together. All the while they are gazing and smiling peacefully at one another, without any contempt, jealousy, envy, or rivalry that patriarchy so wilfully tries to ingrain in women to prevent them from forming a sisterhood and rising up against it, making calculating use of the Roman strategy of 'divide and conquer'. Magsaysay-Ho's work touched a deep longing inside myself, a longing for an inclusive and global sisterhood, for a global community full of women of the Artemis-archetype, that embrace each other's presence and work together to create a more ethical society.

I see a narrative role for art, a role to materialize the untold stories, to make tangible the stories and patterns that guide our lives and provide various alternatives to the dominant archetypal paths laid out for us. Art can show us different ways to be a woman, a mother, a rebel, and through this, art can shape our ideas that we have of ourselves. Art can ask us who we want to be, who we want to become.. Art can reveal a voice to us that we had ignored or neglected before or that we didn't know existed, either within or outside of us. Art can make us learn new things about ourselves and inspire us to become who we want to be.

Art can ask us: 'who are you?'

Me.



Utrecht, October 2022.

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CURACAO, 2022

November 26th

Dear me,

I really like what you wrote in your last letter about the narrative role of art, the way art can make visible the mostly invisible 'desire lines' and archetypal patterns that structure our ideas and expectations and it reminded me of a

course on ethics I had taken during my study in Philosophy that I followed for a year. In that course, I was very intrigued by the ancient Greek form of ethics, Aristotle's 'virtue ethics', in which the emphasis lays on moral education and becoming a 'moral' or 'virtuous' person, by 'just doing' and learning from your mistakes, rather than by endlessly studying abstract theory about morality. This practical approach to ethics — as well as the later feminist adaptation of virtue ethics into 'care ethics' that takes traditional feminine values and character traits as its starting point — really stuck with me and now that I read your letter about archetypes and how they can help us envision our lives and ourselves, I was reminded again of the virtue ethics.

Virtue ethics does not give us some calculation or formula to determine how we can perform 'just actions' and become a morally good person, rather it requires us to constantly try to embody the 'virtuous person'. There is a lot of confusion about who this 'virtuous person' should be or where to find them, but it seems to me, that the 'virtuous person' is found everywhere, in every culture and every country in their myths and stories, in collectively shared narratives that shape our ideas on right and wrong, good and bad. These stories function as a framework of reference that we can fall back on when we feel lost or unsure and that can guide us in our actions, providing us with the archetypical 'virtuous person' that we can try to emulate as well as with the archetypical unvirtuous 'bad guy' whose behaviour we learn to avoid.

Aristotle argues that becoming such a 'morally good person' is something that takes time and happens through trial and error, that mistakes are part of this transformation, and that education fulfills a very important role in transforming all citizens into virtuous people. Like Aristotle, the author bell hooks emphasizes the role of education in her book '*Teaching to Transgress*' from 1994, in which she describes education as the starting point for teaching the new generations to resist oppressive patterns, imagine new ways of structuring the world and bringing about change in society. She believes that inclusivity starts within education, where students of the marginalized groups should be allowed and encouraged to voice their opinions and make themselves heard, allowing the students from the dominant middle-upper class to be confronted with voices and experiences that differ from their own. For hooks, the teacher plays a major role in creating an equal learning environment that is safe and encouraging for everyone, that enables balanced as well as challenging discussions and exchanges to take place and that allows for the mental and moral growth and flourishing of all students. I too believe that change and improvement — of oneself, of the community and of the attitudes and notions that are carried by society — start with education. Education holds such an enormous power to rattle at the foundations of toxic, unequal, oppressive, and harmful systems, to shape and change our ways of thinking and form us as individuals, although I have to honestly say that my own experiences in schools were not very ground-breaking.

~~It is ironic that~~ I, with my seemingly disappointing experiences with all kinds of schools I attended, still find education to be the most fertile grounds for sowing change and improvement, and I myself have tutored high school students the two years after I finished high school, and now find myself here in Curaçao, teaching about conceptual art and protest art to teens and young adults and really.

I remember when I was small, my parents read us several times from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's 'Le Petit Prince' (1943) and the story itself, as well as his beautiful drawings struck something in both me and my sister and later I would go on to reading it myself many times both in Dutch and in French, coming back every now and then to this enchanting story of this little boy, who so bravely and openly faces the world and all its incomprehensible rules and constructs. His personage is one that I always carry with me, that has definitely shaped me and the way I see and define love and friendships, the way I would want to live my life, with his same open, honest and adventurous attitude towards all beings. In many ways for the text and illustrations merged to be one inseparable whole of narrative artwork.

I think art can do more than just show us the narratives that structure us and our behaviour and expectations in life, art can also hold up a mirror and make us reflect on ourselves and our actions. Art can encourage us to improve ourselves, to shape and define ourselves and become the morally good 'virtuous person' we have imagined from time to time. Art can not only provide us with archetypical figures, but also with moral exemplars, can show us images of virtuous persons, situations, character traits, that trigger us and tease us, that challenge us to find these in ourselves. Art cannot only ask us who we are, but also nudge us to think about who we not yet are, but who we want to become.

Never stop learning and educating yourself!

Me.

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Utrecht, November 2022.

MUSEUM SQUARE, AMSTERDAM, 2022

December 6th

Dear me,

You wrote in your last letter that you see a narrative role for art, a kind of 'moralizing' role that can inspire people to become better by making certain 'virtuous archetypes' visible and tangible to the public. I have to say, ~~what a load of crap~~ I wholly disagree. I do not think that people can or even feel the need to change or better themselves, when they are trapped in a corrupted, rotten system. Living inside an oppressive system also means that changing and bettering oneself is a privilege only available to those who are already better off within that system, while those who are struggling do not have the means or even the time or energy to 'better themselves', when they are scrambling to make ends meet.

Hoping that this system will change by individuals independently choosing to change themselves is both naive and destructive. It is destructive because it allows the system to perpetuate while the oppressed are busy seeking the solution to the problem within themselves instead of actively demanding change, and because improvement will largely depend on those with leisure and opportunity to make that change, while they might not have any incentive to do so, because the system has benefitted them to be where they are now.

Instead of aiming to 'moralize' individuals, art should be activist and anarchistic of character and be directed at governments, armies, police, and the companies who are enforcing the system of oppression onto its subjects, especially oppressing the most vulnerable groups and individuals, marginalizing, stereotyping, and discriminating against them while leaving them no room to resist or fight back.

When you say that art can 'ask us who we are and who we want to be', these are completely ~~idiotic~~ the wrong questions. Instead, art should attack the system that has put limits to who we are and who we can be, by asking us: 'who are you in this system?', 'who or what does the system want or force you to be?' and 'how can you free yourself from this?'. Art should confront us, violently, if necessary, with the fact that our choice of who we are is not free, that the system we live in has limited us severely by putting us into boxes and labelling us, even before we ourselves were conscious of these questions. Art should make us aware that being and becoming who we want to be are privileges only handed out to a small upper middle and higher class.

In the introduction of their book 'The Force of Nonviolence' from 2020, Judith Butler writes on 'self-dependence', the legitimate use of violence that is only being allowed to a limited scope of 'selves', while other selves, selves that seem alien to the

elves included by the system, are excluded from this right to self-defend. By denying a specific group this right, the individuals in this group cannot arm themselves properly against the violence of other elves and against violence from the unjust system that is embodied by the police, the military, and the 'justice' system. This way, subjects are classified into 'us' and 'them', and more specifically into 'us versus them' and 'them as a threat to us', which allows the systematic use of violence to oppress the elves that are classified as 'them', because of the supposed threat they form for society. Through this calculated bestowing and erasing of people's rights and humanity through selecting which 'elves' are included, and which are not, the system renders certain groups powerless against its violence, Butler writes.

Art is a way of resisting this separation and classification of elves, which results in a monotonous society where only the voices of the selected few get to speak and be heard, creating a monologue, rather than a dialogue. Art can get around little rules making revolting difficult, and art can be the voice of those oppressed and marginalized, and in this way incite revolution and change. Right now, art is being put to use to support the Women's Revolution in Iran, to spread its message and keep the revolution alive. Right now, several artists are using their art to speak up about the war in Ukraine, to resist and ridicule Putin, the Russian troops, and the powerful countries, who stand by and watch while chewing on their words about world peace. Art has been used countless times to oppose oppression, racism, sexism, and fascism. Art has been used by Black Lives Matter activists, by the members of Guerrilla Girls and Pussy Riot. And although it seems obvious to combat the violent ways of the system with more violence, more subtle and nuanced ways are surely possible.

The Chinese activist Ai Weiwei used his sculpture 'He xie' of 3200 porcelain crabs as a satirical wordplay and as a subtle but deeply critical reference to the ways the Chinese government has suppressed criticism directed at itself. The Chinese word 'he xie' for 'river crab' also means 'harmonious', which is a word frequently used and emphasized by the Chinese authorities to justify censorship and their use of violence to oppress political opponents, activists, and Chinese civilians. Right now, in China, the word 'alpaca' is used in a similar way, because 'alpaca' sounds like Chinese for 'fuck your mother' and to demonstrate that they oppose the government's extremely strict covid-policy. Chinese subjects go to the streets carrying alpaca plushies. In the same way, the Belgian song 'Goeiemorgen' became a hit suddenly in war-ravaged Ukraine, where 'goeiemorgen' sounds like 'fucking bullshit' in Ukrainian, and people use the song to express their feelings around the lack of electricity since Russia bombed several power stations.

Art can resist violence. Art can be a way to oppose oppressive systems and find ways around censorship and limiting rules and laws. Art has the potential to assemble people, to corrode and destruct the system from within, even when the art itself is not violent. This is Butler's 'Force of Nonviolence' embodied in art.

~~Suck on that.~~

Me.

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Utrecht, November 2022.

UTRECHT, 2023

December 27th

Dear me(s),

I saw this sentence float past in one of my letters to me: 'art can ask you who you are'. This question: 'who are you?' is so interesting to me, partly because ~~I think~~ I can never answer it. I am not one straight-forward, clear-cut, permanent and unchangeable 'me', rather, 'I' consist of many different 'me-positions', that all have their own voices that argue for their wants, needs and perspectives to be heard, often contradicting or conflicting with those of other me-positions.

In their article about the 'dialogical self' from 2007, Hermans and Dimaggio describe the self as being dialogical, meaning that the self is constructed by various self-positions that are engaged in a continuous dialogue, which shapes the self and evolves along with it. This conception of the self as a sort of gathering or community of selves allows for a much more flexible and mutable self, that can be conflicted, in doubt, or torn between different desires and choices. This dialogical self is dynamic, open to change, and exists as a collection of different voices or aspects of the self, a 'society of the mind', as Hermans describes it.

This word, society, immediately calls on the vision of something greater, of an external dialogue between many different dialogical selves or groups of selves. Hermans explains this connection between the inner and outer dialogue in his idea that the process of globalization affects our internal debates. He argues that the current heightened exposure to other selves and their often conflicting perspectives and ideas and the increased number of confrontations with the 'other' results in increased tensions within the self. According Hermans, this results in the intensification of certain internal voices, causing the inner dialogue to become more heated and the differences between these voices and the existing conflicts to amplify. Those heightened inner tensions between different self-positions can then cause a kind of overprotective 'anti-reaction', where the voices perceived as alien to the self are drowned out or silenced in some way, resulting in an internal monologue, closing off the self to new ideas or voices that challenge the dominant perspective.

From a dialogical perspective, I see art as a link between the internal and external debates that are constantly being held and that shape both ourselves and the world around us. Art can spark our internal dialogue and through this, constructively strengthen or challenge our existing self-positions or introduce new voices, thereby enabling our inner dialogue to flow, without it being restricted or dominated by a single view. In one letter, I wrote that I see art as a constructive way to express conflicting and confusing feelings, but I think that art in turn influences and constructs these

feelings and emotions. By confronting us with the external dialogue, art can help us construct our views and opinions about things and debates in the world.

One example of 'dialogical art', I find in Louwrien Wijers' 'mental sculpture' from 1990, called 'Art meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy', which brought together several well-known artists, economists, scientists, and spiritual leaders to have a five-day ongoing discussion. With her mental sculpture, Wijers created a dialogue between voices from very different fields and perspectives, which both sparks the dialogue between the invited participants, but also the dialogue within the outsiders who watch the recording or read the transcripts of these discussions. In this way, Louwrien Wijers directly confronts us with the dialogue that exists within society between different people, different fields, and different cultures, forcing us to evaluate our own ideas on the presented topics, sparking our inner dialogue. I understand Wijers' 'mental sculptures' as forms of art that are carried as unique imprints and remnants within the different people that took part in, witnessed, or experienced the artwork in some way, connecting all these different people as well as having the potential to shape all these individuals or their actions in some way and sprout into something new. The artwork then creates a mental network between all these people, their memories of the artwork, and the new thoughts or actions emanating from it, resulting in a mental 'sculpture'.

This is the potential I appreciate most in art: art's way of connecting people with the unknown and the other, sparking our inner debates and forcing us to make space for this debate and listen to the different voices existing within us. I see art as something that can help us develop our different self-positions in a constructive way and strengthen the dialogical self within us.

Me and all ~~the~~ my me's.



Utrecht, November 2022.

CURACAO, 2022

January 3rd

Dear me,

Something ~~incomplete~~ struck me in your last letter. You write about the dialogical self in relation to the potential you see for art as a constructive starting point for internal dialogue, which then goes on to shape the self. But not all

dialogues that shape us and our views and experiences are constructive. Many such dialogues are violent clashes of opposing views, in which the other is not even seen as a talking partner, but as an object. Many things that spark our inner debates and urge us to think critically of our own existing stances and attitudes towards things in the world are highly uncomfortable and confrontational, not constructive or balanced at all! And most times when a dominant view is challenged, either within us or out in the world, this happens through great struggles and through the forceful raising of the silenced or oppressed voices, because otherwise it might not be heard or listened to. Most progress, whether personal, societal, or global, doesn't happen through respectful conversations on equal basis, but through immense effort and with great resistance to the other.

Frantz Fanon defends the legitimacy of the use of violence by colonized peoples as a means to fight oppression and pursue decolonization in his book 'The Wretched of the Earth' (1961). In his eyes, because the colonized are not recognized as (equal) human beings by the colonizers, they are not bound by any restrictions applying to human beings in their responses to the colonizers that use violence themselves to try and strip them of the humanity that would otherwise bind them to non-violent moral principles. With this, Fanon argues not for nonviolence like Judith Butler, but for violence as a legitimate and appropriate response to oppression and a power's attempts to dehumanize and 'de-self' a marginalized group.

Fanon wrote many of his anti-colonial philosophical works in response to his observations during his work as a psychiatrist in Algeria, where he witnessed how marginalized bodies started to internalize the dominant voice of their oppressors, and started to see themselves as inferior to them. In a way, their inner dialogue had become dominated by the violent oppressive perspective of the white colonizers, colonizing their inner society of selves and establishing a monologue that echoed the view dominant in their surroundings. In Fanon's work and observations, I clearly recognize how the internal and external dialogues relate to and influence each other. To ensure a free flowing dialogue within society, every body must be recognized and heard as an equal human self, and loud voices that drown out the more vulnerable ones need to be actively opposed.

Only through active and deliberate effort can we ensure that such a free and non-restrictive dialogue can also exist within us. In her farewell speech from 2021 'Van kunstgeschiedenis naar World Art Studies: de wereld op zijn kop' Kitty Zijlmans identifies a shift within art history towards a more inclusive 'World Art Studies' that requires us to decolonize our ways of looking and conceptualizing and asks that we become aware of the non-neutral and normative frameworks and language that are used the ways we recount history and look at art. To fully develop a 'World Art Studies' that looks critically at our suppositions and incorporates the perspectives of 'the other', we need to view art from a politically engaged global perspective and create space for the multitude of creative voices, perspectives, and cultures that affect each other within the world. Zijlmans argues that this 'World Art Studies' should not affirm a hierarchical dichotomy by taking over indications such as 'Western' and 'non-Western', but should step away from the Eurocentric focus on art history and instead take transcultural exchanges as its starting point. In this way, Kitty Zijlmans proposes a non-violent and constructive way of encountering one another and each other's cultures and viewpoints within a history of violent encounters and oppression and I think this could contribute to opening up people's understanding of perspectives that might diverge from their own and help shape an inclusive dialogue.

More than strengthening existing self-positions or having us focus on our own existing self-positions, art should confront us with the other and with their experiences of the world and of ourselves. This does not need to be 'smooth' or constructive, ~~it~~ ~~can be~~ it should be explicit and confrontational. Dialogues are not only found in friendly conversations, they are also found along the fault lines, between bursts of violence and protests, within the screams of those frustrated and angry. Art can introduce us to new voices and perspectives and incite us to evaluate critically our existing self-positions and our accepted views on things, causing us to integrate new voices into our inner dialogue, causing our dialogical self to change and evolve. Art can counter our existing ideas, can force us to look at what we ignored before.

In an interview, the abstract painter Sam Gilliam explains why abstract art is political to him. According to Gilliam, abstract art challenges us to try and understand something that we don't immediately understand or recognize, something that does not resemble us, and through this, it challenges us to open up to our traditional ways of looking, understanding and valuing things. Gilliam sees this as a way to 'mess with the viewer', to challenge them to see worth in what is different, which he translates to the political spectrum, because this also urges us to see worth in people or cultures that don't resemble us and our ways of being.

While teaching an art class here in Curacao, it became painfully clear once again that I, as a Western-European white woman, fit much of the dominant perspective that is pushed in international discourse, while most of my students do not. Showing them the surrealist experimental movie 'La Planète Sauvage' by René Laloux, in which the human race is used as pets and exterminated as a pest by the dominant ruling species of giant blue aliens that invaded earth, I suddenly became aware that this movie is specifically targeting the Western white, privileged person. The entire human race in the movie exists of only white characters (which I never noticed before, because in their whiteness they resemble me) and the movie aims both at making its white viewers aware of the ways they themselves are the oppressors in reality, as opposed to the poor white humans in the movie, that are treated as objects. The movie is aimed at the white viewer, because only by seeing ourselves in the position of the underdog, can we suddenly manage to conjure any kind of compassion or emotion, which we need to learn to translate to the outside world, where we are the ones with the bad history of treating both animals and the non-white person as objects.

I see art as having the potential to challenge the dominant voice within internal and societal discourse, introducing new perspectives and amplifying usually muffled voices. Art should confront us with our own assumptions and expectations, it should urge us to think critically of ourselves and the societies we live in, only through this can we truly evolve and change.

Me.



Utrecht, December 2022.

GERMANY, 2023

January 4th

Here, in the country where I was born, where my mother's roots lie and my mother's mother lives, I'm reading 'Het zelf als moeder' (2022) the inaugural speech of Inge van Nistelrooij, which she gave to my mom to give to me, when she heard I was writing about Hermans' dialogical self-theory. In her speech, Van Nistelrooij approaches the dialogical self theory from the perspective of pregnancy, fertility, motherhood and the 'boarder-connectedness' between mother and child during pregnancy, and she criticizes the theory for focusing too strongly on the individual self, while paying too little attention to the interwovenness between individuals, which she argues starts during our first beginnings in the womb.

Van Nistelrooij's speech reminded me of a letter where you describe yourself as a potential mother and reference the artworks of Louise Bourgeois as visualization, which Van Nistelrooij surprisingly or not so surprisingly, does as well. In her speech, Van Nistelrooij also questions Hermans' definition of the self as 'ultimately empty' (the self is an empty space where our inner dialogue is held) because she thinks this conception of the self does not do justice to the many interpersonal relationships that constitute and shape the self and are fundamental to it.

This mention of the self as emptiness reminds me of the Buddhist worldview that my dad adheres to, that sees the self and every other thing as fundamentally empty and lacking of an 'individual identity, because everything is ultimately the same thing. Instead, Buddhism proposes that our illusion of us having a self and our 'own' identity, comes from the endless stream of 'now' which is reality, that is accompanied by temporary sensations, making us think there is something, some self, experiencing these sensations, while in reality Buddhism says, there isn't.

One could ask however, what it is then, that is undergoing all those sensations, or what it is that is conscious of this string of moments. For a long time, I myself also felt very compelled by the Buddhist narrative and way of thinking about life and death, but over the years, I wandered upon too many inconsistencies, too many inexplicable things, like all religions seem to



have in common, and instead I shifted more towards my mom's atheist, humanistic way of approaching life. However, I still find myself very interested and sort of 'fond of' Buddhism in a way, and it seems I can never look at things completely without any Buddhist notions lingering in the back of my mind.

It seems that, however much we try to free ourselves from them during our young adult life, that we can never really separate ourselves from our parents, there will also be something connecting, pulling us towards them, or some parts of them that have manifested in us in visible or invisible ways. For me, this is especially true for my mother, whom I resemble not only in looks, but also in thoughts, ideas, interests, and neurotic behaviour. It is my mom who sent me pictures of Janaina Mello Landini's artworks, because she often uses pictures of Landini's art of interweaving and unravelling yarn that resemble trees, roots, lungs, or veins to help her students visualize the interwovenness and interconnectedness between people.

I too, find her works fascinating, narrative, comfortable, and beautiful. Her long, winding and unwinding lines resembling the life paths of many people, crossing, intersecting, blending, letting go, and through this, I also recognize the evolution of our 'selves', constantly changing, often under the influence of the people around us. Although I do not see the self as something 'fixed', something having a permanent 'core', I wouldn't call it wholly empty either. Rather, see our selves constructed and deconstructed, influenced and shaped by those around us, like I was mainly formed under the influence of my parents, who, in turn, were influenced by me, as my birth incited both my parents to change their career completely, leading my father to find Buddhism and my mother to study humanistic, which changed them and then went on to change me again.

It seems though, that there is a part of the self that remains searching, that escapes the influence of the present others surrounding us, that part of the self that stays confused and wandering, that part that keeps wondering who this 'me' experiencing everything really is, or truly ought to be, or how they would be different in a different setting, with different people around them. This part might be helped with some mental or spiritual landmarks, some narrative examples or a red thread to orientate itself on during its search through life.

To me ~~at this point you know what's coming~~ art can function as such a landmark, as a storyline, a reminder, or a way to help us visualize what we want in life, or what we don't want, or what we wished we would want. I think art can help us navigate the entangled chaos of life and decide which of the many lines pulling on us are worth following and which we might want to resist. Art can help us to fill the remaining empty space within our selves with images, ideas, ideals, and dreams, and in this way can help us recognize and find what we were looking for.

Art can help us answer the question 'who is this me?'

Me.



Utrecht, December 2022.

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UTRECHT, 2023

January 10th

Lieve ik,

Als je me vraagt: 'wie ben je?'; dan is mijn eerste gevoel meteen dat ik mens ben, en dat ik in die menselijkheid met alle andere mensen verbonden ben, dat ik, ondanks al onze verschillen in denken, overtuiging, opvoeding, uiterlijk en voorkeur, toch iets met hen deel, iets wat ons 'gelijken' maakt. Dit is ook wat Hannah Arendt benadrukt in 'The Human Condition' (1958), onze pluraliteit, die het mens-zijn in oneindig veel verschillende vormen uniek maakt in elk individu, maar ook de gelijkheid, die ons ondanks onze onderscheidingen, toch met elkaar verbindt en ons verantwoordelijk maakt voor de ander en ons oproept de ander met respect te behandelen. Volgens Arendt maken deze pluraliteit en gelijkheid deel uit van onze menselijke conditie, en scheppen zij de voorwaarden voor onze omgang met de medemens.

Jaap van Praag schrijft in 1953 over het humanisme, een levensvisie die de mens centraal stelt en uitgaat van een zin of betekenis in het leven die niet door God gegeven is, maar die ontstaat in onze omgang en interacties met de ander. Zingeving is iets 'wat we doen', en de Franse filosoof Jean-Paul Sartre onderschrijft dat in 'L'existentialisme est un humanisme' (1943) als hij beschrijft hoe de essentie van het zijn volgens hem door onszelf geconstrueerd en zichtbaar wordt in ons handelen. Sartre ziet het ontbreken van een God en een voorgeschreven essentie of moraliteit als enorme vrijheid, maar wel als een vrijheid die dwingend is en ons opzadelt met een even zo grote, overweldigende verantwoordelijkheid, die zowel beangstigend is als ons verplicht zelf in onze 'vrijheid' onze keuzes te maken. Het is die verantwoordelijkheid die ik sinds ik mij kan herinneren als een enorme last ervaar, een last die mij verlamt, maar me tegelijk beveelt om 'iets van mijn leven te maken'. Een bevel dat heel dwingend, maar zo totaal vaag en onbegrijpelijk is, dat ik niet weet wat er nu precies van mij gevraagd wordt. Ik voel het appel, maar ik weet niet wat ik er mee moet. Ondertussen brengt dit appel een heel scala aan existentiële vragen met zich mee,\* en het lijkt bijna een onmogelijkheid om die vragen te kunnen beantwoorden zonder eerst een heel leven geleefd te hebben, maar al tijdens dat leven is dat appel er en zijn die vragen er. En dus moet ik leven, gewoon zomaar, zonder handleiding zonder antwoord op de vragen, zonder te weten wat juist is en wat niet, gewoon uitproberend, gaandeweg vallend en dan weer opstaand, zo nu en dan terugkomend op ondervonden waarheden, struikelend, in een poging mijn mens-zijn te doorgronden en mij er tegelijk van te bevrijden.

Dit betekenis geven ~~of althans, betekenis verzinnen~~ aan het bestaan komt me ook zo typisch menselijk voor. Waar dieren tevreden zijn met gewoon zijn, verzinnen wij mensen tal van rituelen, verhalen, mythes en filosofieën, om de 'waarom' van ons leven te kunnen verklaren, maar dat lukt nooit. En dus verzinnen we ons een slag in de rondte, en maken we kunstwerken die iets van die betekenis probeert te (be)grijpen, visueel te maken, als een manier om uiting te geven aan onze zoektocht en aan de onzekerheid van ons wankele bestaan, als poging antwoorden te geven op de enorme, onbeantwoordbare vragen van het leven, die op ons af lijken te denderen vanuit de kosmos ~~terwijl ze natuurlijk gewoon alleen maar in ons eigen hoofd zitten.~~

Kunst kan ons uitdagen de grote verantwoordelijkheid van ons bestaan aan te gaan, kan een handvat zijn in onze zoektocht naar betekenis, of juist een struikelblok. Kunst kan ons confronteren met dat ultiem menselijke, dat zoeken naar zin, de wens een menswaardig bestaan te leiden en niet 'voor niets' te hebben geleefd ~~wat in gods naam zoiets moge betekenen.~~ Ik moet denken aan de vroegste vormen van menselijke 'kunst', zoals de grottschilderingen in de Ardèche (die ik blijkbaar als peuter helemaal heb gemist omdat ik sliep tijdens mijn ouders' tocht door de grot) en het komt me raadselachtig voor wat deze prehistorische mensen ertoe aanzette tot het maken van iets ogenschijnlijk zo 'nutteloos', zo 'zinloos'. En ik kan niet anders denken dan dat de activiteit van het schilderen van figuren voor deze lang verdwenen mensen op de een of andere manier wel zinvol was, net zoals deze zelfde activiteit vele duizenden jaren later voor mij ook zinvol is.

\*de universele vragen des levens, vragen als:  
'waarom ben ik hier?'; 'hoe maak ik mijn leven  
waardevol?'; 'wat betekent het om mens te zijn?';  
enzovoorts...

Lieps,  
Van mij

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Utrecht, January 2023.

SWEDEN, 2019

January 24th

Dear me,

I read your letter on being human and it made me think. I think I disagree with you. To me, our being human does not exist in a vacuum, and the question 'who are you?' does not make me immediately think of some ecological niche, some biological species that distinguishes me, separates me from all other life forms. Rather, I see myself primarily as a part of a much bigger whole, as only a tiny drop in the ocean that is the global community of all life forms. By first and foremost establishing myself as 'human', I am conforming to the dividing nature of human language and the exclusivity of man-made categories, while actively denying or even severing my connections to other life forms within the vast pool of life.

Who knows where the molecules making up my momentary body have been before they became part of me or even before my existence? Well, obviously I do know, and so do we all, and those very molecules come from my food, from plants! How can my body exist as fundamentally different from these plants if we share the same molecules and if I need them for my subsistence?

Even my body right now is not truly 'my body', as I believe the number of microbes and bacteria outnumber the amount of human cells in our bodies, which is just weird to think about but also completely undermines the whole idea of the category 'human' or 'what counts as a human', as we could not even function or exist without these micro-organisms.

I suspect that it is this very tendency, this urge of humans to distinguish themselves as separate or 'above' nature, that has led to the current state of the world and the massive destruction of ecosystems. And at the same time, this tendency has led to certain groups of people trying to gatekeep humanity and prevent other groups of people from being able to claim humanity for them as well, by equating these others to animals in language and through what was still accepted as 'science'. This separating from the other by dehumanizing them, immediately provides a cover and justification for the horrific and inhumane way of treating the other and exploiting them for personal profit.

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess argues that the human being is not separate from its environment at all, rather, the human being consists in part of its fundamental relationship with its environment. In this way, he sees the human self as an 'ecological self', and he argues that because our 'being in the world' is such a fundamental part of who we are, we cannot come to pull 'self-realization' when the human and non-human beings we identify with through our relations are hindered in

their self-realization. According to Naess, our self-realization is dependent on our ability to transcend the boundaries of our 'ego' through our openness to the other and to otherness.

I think this way of seeing could be very helpful in our current fight to stop the destruction of ecosystems for personal gain: when we understand that we cannot gain all that much when these gains rely on the exploitation and destruction of a fundamental part of ourselves, we will see that this fundamental part of us needs to be protected in order for us to flourish as well.

To me, Ana Mendieta makes this fundamental connection between our 'selves' and our environment tangible in her series of self-portraits where she portrays herself as a part, or an imprint, or a human-shaped stain on the landscape. Her pictures do not only show herself as a part of her surroundings, but also the dialogue between her and her surroundings and the ways the two merge, influence, shape each other.

I think art has the potential to show us that the self does not end at the skin, that we are not only shaped by our relationships with other humans, but also by those with non-human beings and our environment, making us a part of the ecosystem Earth, binding us together as well as to our planet and making us question what it is, if anything, that makes us human.

Me.



Maastricht, February 2023.

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GHANA, 2018

January 26th

Dear me,

'What makes us human?' you ask me? I would say the very fact that you ask me this question and that I respond to it, is what makes the both of us human. I think it is this very interaction that is so unique to us, this complicated language, full of cultural coded messages, symbolisms, and subtle indirect hints, that seems so out of place in our evolution aimed at efficiency. At the same time, our language has enabled us to communicate with each other about very complicated, specific, metaphysical, abstract and fantastical things, and allows us to get to know (to some degree) the other's inner world. It has enabled us to construct universal, archetypal narratives that guide us, to form rituals, religions, metaphysical and

ethical ideas about the world, and despite our differences in cultures, worldviews and beliefs, we are still able to communicate and understand the other, all be it incomplete understanding or a conversation through a translator. To me, it is exactly that, it is the dialogue with the other that makes us human. What makes the encounter with the other so distinctly human to me, is our constant attempt to bridge the distance to the other with words, we want the other to know us, to see us, to really understand us, we want to share some seemingly essential part of ourselves with the other ~~although often the words that we use to fill the gap are the wrong words and take us only farther away from the other, or make us overlook the fact that the other also wishes to be seen by us, understood by us.~~

The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes the meeting with the face of the other as that which calls on our responsibility for the other and their suffering, he sees our confrontation with the other as that which frees us from being 'caught up in ourselves'. The countenance of the other demands from us that we respond to it, that we respond with compassion to their infinite moral demands, confronting us simultaneously with the closeness and the distance between us and the other. To Levinas, the encounter with the other is what makes us feel responsible for those things and those beings that aren't us, and it is what makes us doubt the complacent certainties we so delicately constructed for ourselves. In this way, the dialogue with the other is what pulls one out of oneself, is what broadens the self and makes us explore or even overstep the boundaries of the self. The sheer presence of the other is what makes us aware of the other's existence and through that of our own and of the boundedness of our self. The 'alterity' (otherness) of the other challenges us to look beyond those limits and open ourselves up to new and different experiences and ways of being.

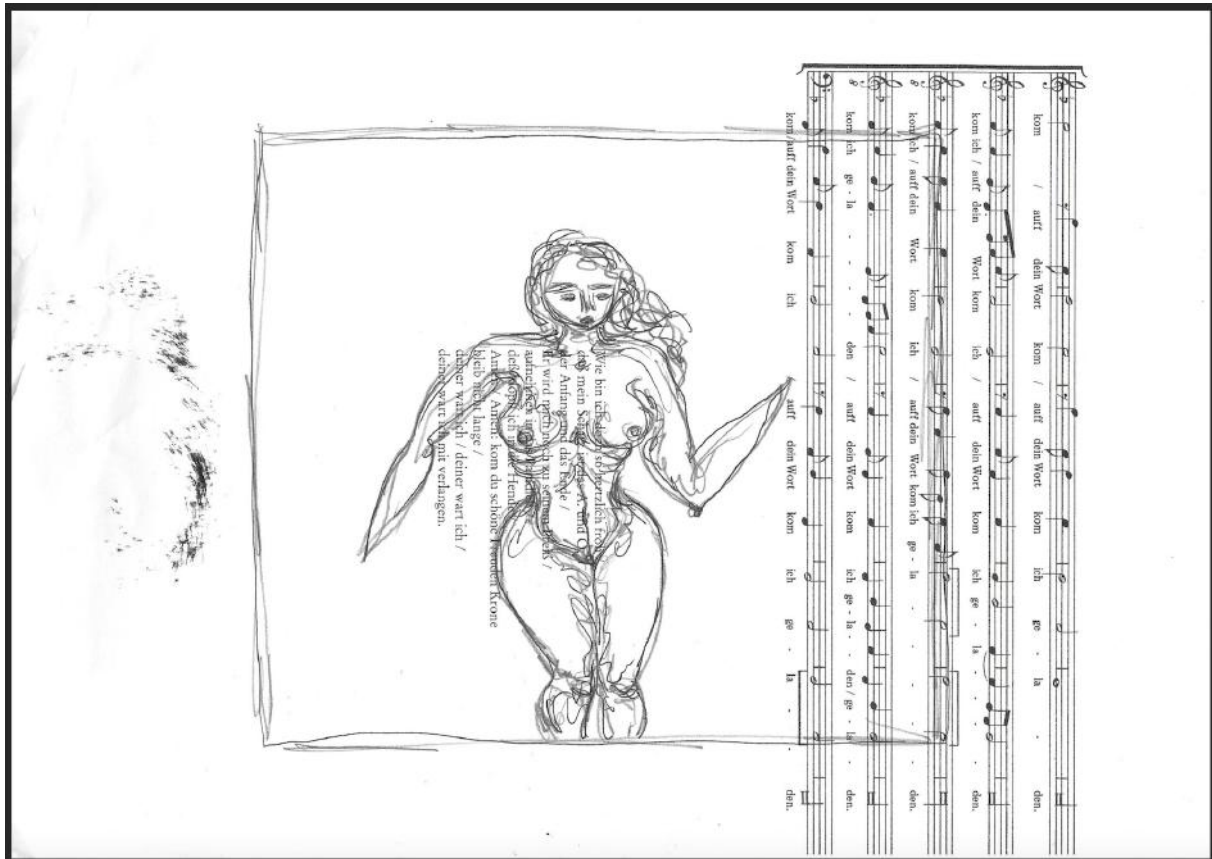
I think the dialogue with the other, however incompetent and stumbling it is sometimes, is essential for us to learn to engage in the dialogue with ourselves, to not run away scared from the parts of ourselves that seem 'different' or alien, to not silence these parts, but to talk with them, negotiate with them, invite them into our inner debate. Through this, the dialogue with the other enables us to construct a self that is broad, all-encompassing, flexible, dynamic, and dialogical, a self that is open to things perceived as 'other', that can change position after internal debate, that does not feel threatened by turbulence, disagreement, or friction within or around itself.

Art can be one of many things that spark such a dialogue with the other, brings us in contact with them or forces us to make contact with someone new. I'm thinking especially of the Thai born artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, who, with his cooking series that started in the 1990s, attempted to bring people together and 'encouraged them to overcome their fear of the other' through sharing food with the other. In his work, the simple act of eating functions to connect people and urges them to make contact and chat with each other, enabling a dialogue that otherwise probably would not have taken place. In a very different way, the social sculptures of Joseph Beuys urge people to feel connected, to feel part of a larger social community, to think about what that means, how they want to act on that being a part of a community, how that should take shape. His art urges people to shape together the public space that they share with each other, undoubtedly sparking dialogue and cooperation between people who joined in his projects.

It is this feeling and understanding of being part of a community, of a society, that is touched or sparked during our dialogues with the other, making us see that the other, by being part of that community as well, might not be as threatening or altogether different from us than we first imagined, making us see the human in the other as well. I think that art, although complicated through the inaccessibility of expensive museums and elitist art institution, when it is made public or put in a public space, art has the potential to connect people and bring about dialogues between people, in a constructive, non-violent way. I think this is what art is for, to bring people together and trigger meaningful conversations. For art to serve this function properly and be available to everyone, it should not be locked away in fancy museums and dwell on million-dollar auctions, but it should roam freely among the people and their common spaces. Art should bring us together, not separate us and reinforce the class system. Art should be for all humans everywhere, all the time.

Me.

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Utrecht, March 2023.

UTRECHT, 2017

February 2nd

Dear me,

Again, you make the same mistake of naively infused optimism when you talk about the dialogue with the other. Many dialogues that take place in daily life are not peaceful or constructive at all, many are awkward, porous, unequal, unfriendly or even unwanted. I don't think I see the presence of the other as ~~a positive thing~~ something that can 'make us stretch and overstep our boundaries' or 'challenge our self-assuredness' but rather as that which constitutes the boundaries and the limits of what is possible for us. Opposed to Levinas, I would side much more with Sartre, who says that our hell is constituted by the presence of the other, meaning that the presence of the other severely limits our personal freedom to do and be what we want to do or be, or what is morally acceptable for us to do. The other makes our life a living hell, because without them, we could live our lives exactly as we please, taking up all space and resources without stopping to think how this would affect others. In our reality however, we can't, we are limited by the sheer existence of the other.

L'enfer, c'est les autres.

Sartre does not, like Levinas, see the encounter with the other as something that 'preserves us from ourselves', rather, he defines the presence of the other as that which robs us of our initial infinite freedom and forces us to be something we're not, forces us to be a 'someone'. The gaze of the other measures us, judges us, violates us, and makes us into a thing. Suddenly, I have to account for myself, and my being is extracted from me and reduced to an object that only exists in the eyes of the other. My being is taken from me, and I am robbed of my own self and forced to exist for another. In this way, Sartre defines the 'gaze of the other' as a 'battlefield', in which we struggle to define and redefine ourselves, to take back our 'self' that the other has stolen while being confronted with the tension between our self as subject and our self as object.

This forcefulness, this violence of the other thrusting themselves into our being, altering our awareness of ourselves, is something I recognize very well. I imagine myself when I'm just existing, doing something or maybe nothing, enjoying myself while sitting in my own room, unaware of my 'self' as a person existing in relation to other beings. At such a moment, my 'self' is not confined to the limits of my body, but stretched to fill the whole room. My being ends with the walls, or even beyond them, with the sky and everything that is visible through the window, and everything in my awareness is part of me and my self. Then suddenly, 'the other' enters my room, and all of the sudden, my being shrinks up to the confinements of my body, and I become aware of my body, of my feminine presenting slender human body with female sex, of my white skin, of my

vulnerability and my responsibility for the continuing struggle against oppression, of my privilege that is reaped of the backs of millions who died a terrible death before my life began, of the violent history that shaped my reality in this world. Suddenly, I have to think of what I'm doing there, in my room, and have to account myself for it. I have to think if it's not weird or shameful, or wrong what I'm doing, and suddenly, my private space is invaded and no longer mine.

The other chains me to this bodily existence in the context of a world I did not shape, suddenly my existence is embedded within something that is out of my control. I am no longer free but bound by earthly conditions and the conditions created by others. These conditions constitute my reality, and my daily life within a densely populated city where the other is inescapable. When I first saw Kara Walker's silhouette art and animation videos in De Pont in Tilburg, I was struck by the violence that spoke from her work, the violent presence of the other. Walker herself describes her work as a way to express her experiences in a world filled with stereotypes, black and white oppositions and simplifications, violent power relations, and oppression, and as a way to cope with the hateful narratives, derogatory definitions and racial profiles that have seeped into her way of thinking and shaped her imagination and fantasies. Walker then lets her imagination run free in her artwork, stating that she 'rather wants that in her art than in her head'.

Hearing Kara Walker talk about her art as a way to help her deal with her internal struggles and the dominant narrative she internalized, makes me think that art can be a way for people to understand and recognize how their own existence is framed within the world, and might help them recontextualize their own being and internal struggles. Perhaps art can offer us some respite, some world away from this one, where we can establish ourselves without the confusion and frustrations from the outside world. Perhaps it can offer us a walking cane, that helps us navigate the inescapable encounter with the other, and teach us how not to let the gaze of the other define us, but find our own ways of being. Perhaps art can help us escape the other and the forceful, restricting grip of their gaze and make us free.

Me.



Maastricht, March 2023.

TILBURG, 2020

February 4th

Dear me,

It's very surprising to me that you say you wish to escape 'the other', wish to free yourself from them. I understand that life can be painful, even traumatizing, or bad enough that you wish you could leave it altogether, but I wonder if life without any others is worth living in itself. I keep thinking of this hypothetical person living on a deserted island, living exactly how they please but never interacting or connecting with any other person... Could anyone desire such a life? Is there not something fundamental missing there? Have you lived, when no one else was there to witness your life, when no one will remember you? Can you learn to be human when you have to learn all on your own?

And on the other hand, if there is something fundamental in a life shared with others, should we take that risk of being hurt by them? Should we willingly risk being harmed, violated, damaged? Is that a fundamental condition for human life, for figuring out how to be human and how to interact with others? To be honest, I don't know.

I certainly haven't lived the barbie dream life, the life without any painful or violent encounters with others. I have been ~~hurt, emotionally and physically mistreated, I have been lied to, wilfully manipulated, I have had countless of my boundaries broken, my body used and abused by myself and others~~ through the same shit as everyone else. I carry my traumas with me like badly healed wounds, that still sometimes pester and prick when triggered. And although sometimes I wish I could undo all those things and delete some experiences and memories, I just can't. I have to live with them, and somehow, I also have to learn to live with the reality that those experiences are a part of me, without letting them define me, without letting them mark me as a 'victim' or a 'traumatized person'. And that is hard, because they will always be there, be part of my story and part of me. I can't hide them or seal them away and forget them, though I've tried for many years, but somehow they always outrun me and catch me off guard, and I have come to the realization that they're not going anywhere. Belgian psychiatrist Dirk de Wachter says that the 'best revenge on trauma is dignity', and I like that. Going through life with my head held high, facing the causes of my pain and troubles (even when I am one of them) with dignity, showing them that I'm alive, that I'm not broken. I remind myself that a part of the story doesn't define the whole, doesn't say anything about the potential or the ending.

It is this that I see in Kara Walker's art: not defeat, not hate for the other, but someone coping with a generational trauma, finding out where and how it fits in her story and how she fits into the bigger story, giving it a space within her life, without letting it destroy her. I also see this in the paintings of Frida Kahlo: she doesn't shun the painful episode of her life, she doesn't hide the painful, the sad, or the ugly, but pictures them, floating around her, emerging from her bathwater, hiding inside her spine. But it's her presence that is most capturing, her proud, though not arrogant but simply strong, undefeated eyes piercing through the canvas. It's all her, she is the focus, not the trauma. She is the one facing us and her own pain, saying: 'I'm not scared, what else you got?'. Instead of a little, crumpled up bunny, frightened by what life threw at it, I see a strong, unapologetic woman that is living, thriving even, despite her pains, her broken back, or her inability to have children. We see her resilience.

Art, to me, can help us envision our multifaceted selves, can help us mentally piece together our pains and griefs with our strength, can help us see that a couple cracks doesn't necessarily mean 'broken' and that even 'broken' is okay and beautiful in a way. Art can show us that we aren't just a 'victim'; even when we're victimized, that we don't need to look like a new set of porcelain, that experience and understanding sometimes come from hurting and the subsequent healing. Art can help us see that we're whole while we're also torn apart.

Me.

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Maastricht, March 2023.

FRANCE, 2073

February 6th

Dear me,

When you ask me 'what makes us human?'; I instinctively think not about the separate and unique stories we construct through our lives, but about the ending we all have in common. I immediately think about mortality. ~~Obviously~~, it's not so much our mortality, the fact that we will die, that is unique to us humans, but more so the fact that we consciously know that we will. It seems to me that our awareness of our own mortality is a very big defining part of what makes us human and what makes us do certain distinctly human things, such as contemplate what happens after our death with the people we leave behind, or what happens with us or our consciousness after our death, or what we leave behind after we die. And with our awareness of our own inevitable death comes our revulsion towards death in general and our own in particular, and our subsequent attempt to escape it, to 'cheat death', and our final acceptance of death as an undeniable fact.

It is this archetypal plot that we see in so many stories: the protagonist tries to cheat death in some way, inevitably fails and is caught up by fate, ultimately embracing their own mortality. For me, the most impressive and world-shattering story of this kind is also coincidentally the oldest written story in human history: the Gilgamesh epic from Mesopotamia. The story tells the tale of the legendary king of Uruk, Gilgamesh, who is confronted with death when his bosom friend Enkidu dies because their heroic actions have upset the gods. Unwilling to part with his friend, Gilgamesh sits with the decomposing body until the worms crawl from his Enkidu's eyes and Gilgamesh becomes repulsed by the idea of death and sets out on a quest for immortality. Finally having found a plant that gives eternal youth with the help of Utnapishtim, the archetypal survivor of a great flood, Gilgamesh takes a bath, planning to share the plant at home with the elders of Uruk, when a snake steals the plant and slithers away, shedding its old skin. Gilgamesh returns to his city, with wrinkles on his face from searching for immortality, and sits on the city walls that he built himself for the future generations of Uruk and is reunited with his mortality.

I first heard this story when I was around eight years old and have always carried it with me since. The fact that this is the oldest narrative we know of, makes it even more beautiful and the knowledge that we share our struggle with our own looming death with those who lived thousands of years ago and all the generations in between makes it even more a landmark of what makes us human. Some hundreds of years after the appearance of the story, the Greek philosopher Epicurus described the human tendency to fear death as one of the obstacles standing in our way to reach a 'trouble-free state of

mind', which he saw as the ultimate happiness for human beings. He therefore encouraged others to liberate themselves of their fears, arguing that 'death does not concern anyone', as the living are not dead and the dead are not conscious of their own deaths. More recently, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that death is what renders our lives 'ultimately empty' and meaningless, while death also makes us realize what is truly important during our temporary lives. Sartre argued that gaining 'death consciousness' was important for everyone in order to become aware of our short lives on earth and the importance that we make our own choices during this life. By viewing death as a final station, both Sartre and Epicurus shift the focus from the immortality of 'the soul' to our mortal life on earth, transporting the 'meaning of life' from the hypothetical afterlife to the here and now. Suddenly meaning is not something hidden away at the end of life, after our deaths, but we are surrounded by it and create it ourselves.

This shift also happens in the Gilgamesh epic, where Gilgamesh finally realizes that the absolution of his life doesn't lie in becoming immortal, rather he already absolved himself from his mortality by building a durable legacy for the people of Uruk, that will survive even past his death. When I was around 18 years old, I went with my family to the Jheronimus Bosch Art Center, and I was struck by Bosch' intricately detailed and colourful depictions of humans in the afterlife. His works show such a lively and human picture of the unearthly places of heaven and hell because he paints people doing very human things, instead of floating clouds with babies playing harp, his heaven is a spacious green field, with naked people lounging and chilling and his hell is not the typical demon-infested hellfire, but rather a bunch of bizarre looking creatures and contraptions being used to torture people, sometimes operated by other people. These biblical places almost start looking punny because they are so absurd, they aren't really frightening or divine, rather just comical, making me appreciate the green fields here on earth and the fantastical human imagination that helps us to cope with our own mortality by envisioning all sorts of bizarre things.

I guess art can be a way to trigger people to start contemplating death and the fleetingness of life, maybe urging them to focus on what is meaningful and transcendent within their short earthly lives, rather than 'sitting it out', waiting for the 'real' life to happen after death. Maybe art can reconcile us with the absurdity of our mortal lives and make the idea of death a bit less daunting, by helping us find or construct some meaning in the meaninglessness of our existence.

Me.



Utrecht, March 2023.



Dear me,

I read your letter on mortality and it made me think that what is so uniquely human, are not these earthly conditions that bind us, but rather, our never-ending quest to free us from these conditions, to cross the boundaries between 'human' and 'non-human'. And the fact that we as a species have created vastly complex and intricate techniques that blur the lines between natural and artificial, tells me it isn't only possible but even likely that we will succeed at this. That we will be able one day, to escape death and escape our own mortality. We're already doing it. We are delaying death with pills and treatments, extending human life to what was once impossible. Paradoxically, this collective search to escape the limits of our humanity, is also what makes us so human. And we're already pushing these limits, merging ourselves with our technologies.

In 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1985), Donna Haraway argues that the boundaries between humans and technology are becoming increasingly blurred, and that we are already 'cyborgs' in many ways. For example, our reliance on smartphones and other devices has extended our senses and abilities beyond what was once possible for a human. Haraway believes that this trend will continue and that humans will increasingly merge with technology, creating a new kind of being that is both human and machine. This idea of human-tech cyborgs has the potential to bring about significant changes in society, affecting everything from the way we work to the way we think and interact with the world. Haraway sees the development of human-tech cyborgs as a way to challenge and subvert traditional power structures and dichotomies that have historically oppressed marginalized groups.\* *She argues for example that the blurring of boundaries can stretch traditional notions of what it means to be human, of who 'counts as human'; and has the potential to disrupt the hierarchies that exist between humans and non-human entities, such as nature, animals and machines as well as the traditionally ascribed gender roles based on biological essentialism, allowing people to transcend the prescribed roles and create new identities.\**

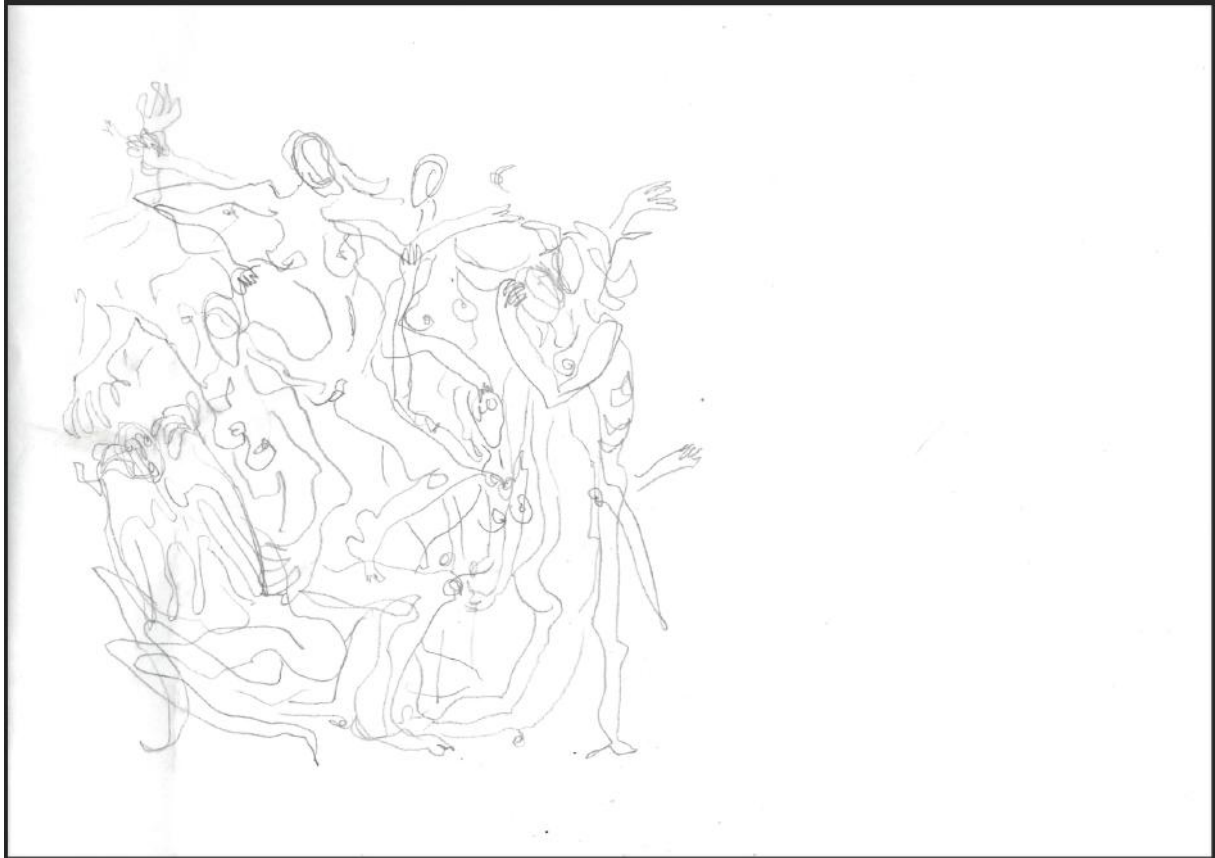
Mariko Mori's Wave UFO builds on the Buddhist idea that all human and non-human life forms in the universe are connected, and unites both the human and non-human, by having a programme collect brain waves of the viewers, transforming them into real-time visuals, blending the neurological impulses of the viewers with one another and with technology. Mori's artwork to me is the perfect example of how art can create feelings of transcending our human boundaries, of interconnectedness and the blurring of lines. It seems to me that what makes us human, is our ability to transcend our human conditions, while other species are inevitably bound by their earthly conditions. Art can show us this tension between human and non-human, and at the same time give us hope for the future, as it can show us that we aren't chained to our present conditions, that we can free ourselves from our current situation. Art can give us the hope that maybe, our own inventions and technologies can save us from our own man-made destruction. In this way, art can provide a glimpse into the future, where the lines between the possible and the impossible, the human and the tech or the alien, have faded. Art can shape our visions of the future and through that, shape our future, by helping us envision worlds in which we escape the inescapable, in which we do the impossible, in which we transcend our own existence.

\*written by chatbot ChatGPT.

\*co-written with chatbot ChatGPT.

I hope that gives you much to think about.  
Me.

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Maastricht, April 2023.

MAASTRICHT, 2021

February 11th

Dear me's,

What a load of bullcrap! All this naive optimistic shit about the connecting with others, the dialogue and the encounter with the other making us human, yet here you all are, writing to yourselves, hiding away with your pen and paper, avoiding your classmates and teachers in the art academy, making 'art' in the solitude of your atelier or room. How can you possibly explain these parts in relation to each other? Are we even human then, to these standards that you set yourself? I propose a different solution: it is NOT our interconnectedness or our communion with one another that makes us human. Rather, it is our violence and our endless attempts at finding differences and flaws in the other, at which we can direct our hatred, discrimination, and violence. And it is not this violence in itself but the infinite creativity humans put so elegantly to use in finding new inventive ways to hurt, damage, and torture the other, and subsequently finding ways of justifying our abuse. What is so distinctly human about us, is our ingenuity at creating devices and methods to inflict pain upon the other, I just think of medieval torture contraptions, slavery, gladiatorial games, and the endless number of guns, hand grenades, atomic bombs, poison gas, and other props we invent to destroy the other.

The tragic irony of humankind is that our creativity is wasted on us. We could have done so many incredible things, but all we care about is making the other suffer for their threatening existence. In that sense, art can only be found on the battlefield, in the broadest sense. These battlefields are quite literally found in the works of Jake and Dinos Chapman, whose miniature landscapes of 'hell' in actuality depict no holy fantasies, but only the horrors of our world, that we unleash on each other in our sacred quest to make life hell on earth for all other human beings who committed the crime of being born in the same world.

I myself have experienced the art academy as a battlefield where I'm constantly at war with the other students, myself, and my teachers, who I have to keep happy by ~~deluding them~~ making hideous drawing that I dislike myself, only to distract them from the work that I love doing, which they don't consider 'art', but which frankly, is the only thing that is keeping me ~~from retiring early from life from frustration and despair~~ going at the moment. It is all one big fake show, in which there is no real connection, no real understanding or interest, only con artists pooling each other, knowing very well the others are pooling too.

Although the art you make is supposedly about 'the connection with others', it comes into being in a very lonely and unconnected way, causing it to reek of elitist empty bullshit and naive pseudo-philosophical blablabla. In this sense, all encounters I have in the art academy, whether with others, myself or my ~~stupid nonsense~~ artwork, are nothing more than repeated slaps to the face, resembling Marina Abramovic and Ulay's performance Light/Dark (1977) in which they sit opposite from each other in a dark room with a blinding light in their faces, alternately slapping each other on the cheek, in an increasingly fast rhythm, until they both look exhausted.

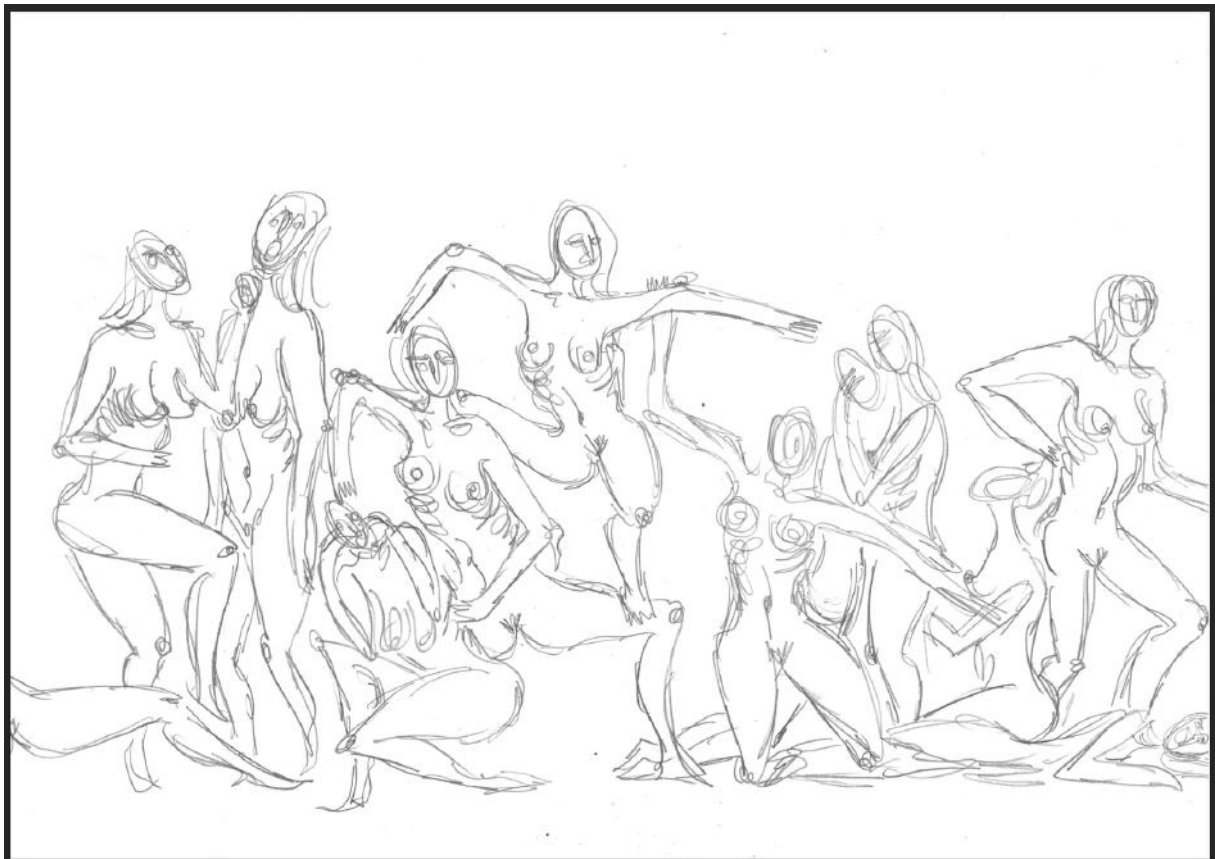
I too am exhausted. Exhausted from the endless stream of nothingness and pretending, and I'm starting to think the 17<sup>th</sup> century British philosopher Thomas Hobbes was right when he wrote in 'Leviathan' (1651) that the natural state of humans is a 'war of all against all'; because of our human nature which is innately brutish, violent, and solitary. So much for meaningful connection with the other. Although some might say that Hobbes' views are pessimistic or simplistic, the world around me and my experiences with it, seem to point more and more in Hobbes' direction, revealing only layers of violence and oppression.

And then, what about art? Is art just a bad coverup, a diversionary tactic to keep us all busy and distracted and obstruct us from seeing beyond appearances? Or is there a meaning to it all? Can art really do something, touch us, construct meaning in the vicious turmoil of the world? I'm not so sure anymore. I thought it did, I truly thought art could make a difference, unite people and make them see past their hateful prejudices, but now I'm unsure and unwilling to make any claim at the risk of burping out empty bubbles of nothing. It seems to me, 'art' cannot do anything against human hate, cannot curb our violent tendencies or make us see reason through our anger. Art is ultimately empty and powerless, annexed as a tool of oppression by the powerful.

What are you going to do about it?

Me.

The one and only.



Utrecht, May 2023.

AMSTERDAM, 2036

February 15<sup>th</sup>

Dear me,

I have read all your letters and have witnessed all your conflicts with one another with a little amusement, especially your first and last letter, as they seem to express such contempt for art, yet here you all are, using your energy and time to write long letters about the subject, even using a work of art to underline your point in your last one. It seems to me that it is not art itself that you feel so negatively about, rather it is the artworld — and one could even contest you in the supposition that such a universal artworld really exists — the art institutions, galleries, funding, and everything around art. These things however in no way represent art in and of itself or the power it holds.

Examining all your letters one by one, I can see that each of you has a point in your own way, which to me only demonstrates the versatility of art and the many different ~~functions~~ roles it can fulfil for someone. I think some great aspects of art that were mentioned by you were its potential to address and protest oppressive ways of thinking and doing, its potential to shape society, ourselves and the future, the way it challenges to overcome our fear of the other, to embrace the multiplicity of being, both in ourselves and in the world around us.\*In a way, what many of you seem to get at, is that art has the power to make you reflect on yourself, on the society you live in, the relations between you and others, between you and the world. Art has the power to make us see things that we didn't see before and make us see things we did in a new way, exactly because art herself is often so slippery and elusive that we cannot fully grasp or understand her, challenging us to change our way of looking.

It is exactly this that is stressed by British philosopher Iris Murdoch, who argues that developing a 'just and loving gaze' towards the other is a fundamental moral task laid out for us. Through discovering moral values, which for Murdoch are factual parts of the fabric of the universe, these moral values slowly transform our ways of seeing and judging others. Murdoch relates this slow inner transformation to the process of the artist, who bit by bit chimes away at their artwork until it reaches its final form. Instead of taking science as a universal model for ethics like many other (often male) philosophers tend to do, Murdoch takes art as its model, arguing that it can reveal certain truths to us through creative imagination, truths that many people might not have noticed or comprehended before. Murdoch also emphasizes the importance for society of many different artists using their work in different ways to reveal all sorts of things, to preserve its independence and prevent its assimilation into a form of state propaganda.

To me, it is exactly art's multiplicity, art's way of confronting us with something that we can't quite grasp or easily understand, that can teach us to look at the other, the one who we cannot fully grasp or figure out either, who we cannot seize or contain, with a loving and just gaze. In this sense, art prepares us for the confrontation with the other, trains our vision and curious openness, teaches us to look at and approach the other with kindness instead of fear, prejudice or rejection. Art is therefore essential to preserve our humanity through our relations to others. As an artist, I would say: art is what makes us human, not because it is completely unique for humans to create artistic works, but because art can be a way of life for human beings.

The first person coming to mind is probably the person who encouraged me to pursue art for itself instead of for financial gain, recognition or a flashy career, a person who basically gave up everything, every comfort in his life and eventually his life as well, to be able to keep making art. His troubled inner life and difficulties in the outer world made him the most cliché artist possibly ever, but for me it does not diminish the beauty and melancholy of his works that I have visited many times during my life in the Krollermüller Museum at the Veluwe, each time allowing me to see his works with new eyes, discover new layers and meanings to them. Another artist who seemed to 'live art', to elevate art above his own life conditions, is the American performance artist from Taiwan, Tehching Hsieh, who broke both his ankles and dedicated 18 years of his life to doing nothing else but 'live' his performance pieces, five of which lasted one year and one thirteen years. Some of his pieces, like Time Clock Piece (1980-1981) had him live under extreme circumstances and Outdoor Piece (1981-1982) was not without any danger for his life, but at this point I would say his art was his life. His last two pieces concerned art itself, during his 'No Art Piece' (1985-1986) Hsieh detached himself from art completely, not allowing himself to engage with art in any way, and during his last ever performance 'Thirteen Year Plan' (1986-1999) he vowed to make art but not make it public, his performance ending on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2000 with a piece of paper on which Hsieh pasted cut out letters saying: 'I kept myself alive. I passed the December 31, 1999'. In an interview, Hsieh indicated art is his primary language to express himself as well as a way to understand life and transform it into art, seeing 'doing art' and 'doing life' as identical to one another. Hsieh sees his pieces as reflections of everyday life, essentially taking situations from his own experiences during a repetitive job as a restaurant cleaner and presenting it as art.

Hsieh puts into words how I feel about art: art is life. And therefore, art is a necessity for human life, that is at least how I experience it. I remember times in which my options for creating works with my hands were limited, causing my hands to itch, hurt almost, and my mind to overflow with all the images and ideas piling on top of each other, unable to get out. Like for Vincent van Gogh, art to me is something to hold onto, something to keep me sane, to prevent me from losing myself, and like him, I would give up a lot for art's sake. To me, art constitutes what I live for, art constitutes freedom, happiness, flourishing. Art naturally follows from the creativity that drives all life forward and in that sense, art, good art, is that life force embodied.

It seems, at least to me, that art holds a pretty important place for all of you as well, even when you might not recognize or express it as such. After all, here we still are, writing long letters about it to one another. So let me get back to that first question once more: 'why art?':

\*as well as art as a medium to express emotions, which even those of you dismissing art based on anger, hate, or frustrations, essentially underline.

Me.



Utrecht, May 2023.

ESSEN, 1998

February 18th

Dear me,

'Why art?' you ask me, well, I think I can explain. For as long as I can remember I have felt a deep conflictedness in almost everything I do, in all my thoughts and ideas, in small daily banalities but even stronger in the convictions and passions that touch closest at the root of who ~~I think~~ I am. This has made me feel like I can never grasp, never fully know or understand myself, 'I' am constantly slipping from my own grip and therefore I am always searching, always chasing myself, never finding anything more than fragments. My art has been the vehicle that brought me closest to myself, to understanding what this 'me' is that I'm searching for. It has allowed me to piece together the snippets of me into something that resembles what I think I am. My art has been the red thread tying together all the different me's that I have been during my life, the past and the present, the potential and the actual, the hopeful and the desperate. My work has allowed me to give space to the endless contradictions, disagreements, and uncertainties within me, has mirrored my image back to me, revealing only unknown otherness. And through this, my work has enabled me to reflect on what it disclosed about myself.

Art both helped me express my doubts and conflicted feelings, and became a tool to give shape to all the different voices, the different wants and needs, the opposing views struggling with each other within me. Envisioning all these different aspects of myself allowed me to get familiar with them, without assimilating them into one homogenous whole. Art allowed me to distinguish myself from the mass of other by constructing a 'me', but at the same time confronted me with the 'otherness' in myself. And through depicting myself, mentally in my daily life and physically in my artworks, as a collection of various

distinct selves, all me but all equally 'other', art challenged me to be open towards the other and try to understand them as I try to understand myself.

In one of his articles on the dialogical self theory (...) Hubert Hermans refers to a quote by the 16<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Michel de Montaigne, who said: 'there is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and others', and this man said in one sentence what I have been struggling to put into words for 24 years. In their 2020 article, Hermans and Dimaggio argue that because our world society has become so intensely interconnected, we need to develop a 'dialogical capacity', that can help us deal with the tensions, contrasts, differences and uncertainties that exist both in the world and within our selves. They see the self as a society of various voices and perspectives that is not wholly separate from external society but intertwined with it. In their views of the self, because it is directly positioned in the world and constructed by our relations with others, their cultures and opinions, others become constitutive parts of the self, as 'extensions of the self'.

As I have become conscious of the context of the world I find myself thrust in, of the long history of human violent, oppression, domination, and hatred towards the other, I have had to find out how I fit into this network of relations and histories and how I can relate to it and to all others connected to me through our common histories. As I make my way through the world, I am treading on a violent past of colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism, and the subsequent struggles against these systems of oppression, I find myself walking with the privilege and wealth that was granted to me by a corrupt mechanism at the expense of others, like some sort of sick welcome gift for being born in the right place.

How do I relate to all this? What do I do with or about it? What should I do about it? Do I stop eating sugar and drinking coffee? Do I stop shaving my legs and wearing dresses? Do I stop paying taxes and buying consumer items? Do I use my privilege for something that I think is good, for something that might change something for the better, or do I renounce it completely? I don't think I know what to do. I feel like everything I possibly could do is rigged from the start. I feel like I can never salvage that a large portion of the world population is hungry right now, or cannot get any education, or is being exploited in some sweatshop somewhere. I feel conflicted at everything I do, every step of the road just leads me further into doubt, because it was paved by hands that weren't mine and that were forced to do so while they bled.

How do I relate to myself, to others, when all we can relate to is this immense, unimaginable violence? How can I learn to have constructive conversations when most conversations that shape history and the society I live in were held at gunpoint? How can I connect with 'the other' when all we know about one another is our differences and that our ancestors fought each other to the death? Where can I find any communion or communication in this never-ending struggle? How can I create that myself?

My art for the most part has been a kind of side effect of me figuring out how to relate to myself, to others, to the global community, me trying to find my own place in it all. And in my own art, I find mostly countless reflections of myself. For some reason, whatever or whomever I'm looking at, I mostly see myself, my own image, reflected in them. I don't know how much I follow Hegel in this regard, but I do think everyone will see something different when looking at the same thing and most likely, what they see will tell them something about themselves, more than about what they're looking at. I guess it touches on what Hegel meant with his 'process of recognition', in which two (or more?) people meet each other and become conscious of themselves through the other, and through that also become aware of the other (recognizing themselves) in us. I guess maybe you don't need another conscious person to become aware of yourself, because whatever you look at will automatically reflect yourself since you are the one looking at it, understanding it from your viewpoint, shaping it in your own eyes. Therefore, this recognition process could very possibly also occur with an inanimate object or an artwork, that allows you to recognize yourself or your multiple selves in the work or makes you recognize parts of the work or its message as already present within you.

For me, what makes art so interesting is that it can broaden our conception of ourselves, show us that we might not be as confined, familiar, homogenous, and 'same' as we might assume. Art can hand us back our own image through the image of someone or something else, and through this, we might come to recognize the 'other' as present in our selves and 'self' as present in the other, allowing us to connect in an open, unhindered way with what formerly seemed alien and strange. According to Hermans and Dimaggio, a constructive dialogue requires that all parties recognize each other's perspective and are willing to revise their own initial ideas and through this dialogical process the other's 'otherness' can become meaningful to us.

When I think of art and what draws me to it, what made me choose to study it and what keeps me talking and writing about it, I think of this ground-breaking potential of art. Art can help us find and construct meaning in the 'other' and confront us with this otherness within ourselves. It is this potential that makes me continue to pursue and look for art throughout my life and it is this potential that I seek to materialize when I'm creating my own works. So much for art.

Catch you later.  
Maira

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