Art and Aesthetics in the Enactive Fold

> “The question of creativity is key: that is, for an animal, for a living being to have a world, it’s something that he actually shapes and creates over evolution and in its own history. It is not something that is given.”
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> —Francisco Varela (excerpt from film on conference “Art Meets Science & Spirituality in a Changing Economy,” session 3 of 5)

> “Beauty, therefore, as a sign of an enlivening situation, is itself giving life. Any aesthetic experience of nature thus is to some degree an ethical assessment. Ugliness, on the other hand, has a certain degree of toxicity.”
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> —Andreas Weber

> “A work of art doesn't have to be explained. If you do not have any feeling about this, I cannot explain it to you. If this doesn't touch you, I have failed.”
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> —Louise Bourgeois

Why art?

If we look closely, aesthetic experience can be said to permeate nearly every dimension of human life: the ethical, the introspective, the relational, the concrete. To navigate this world as a sentient being, in some sense, is to understand oneself as an aesthetic creature; and to understand oneself as an aesthetic creature is to realize one’s embeddedness in a life full of feeling. If we return to the Greek *aisthētikos*, we are reminded of that universal human capacity to *perceive through the senses*. Only much later did the term ‘aesthetics’ become associated with beauty and certain value judgments about perceptual experience.

Art — that primary vehicle of aesthetic experience — returns us to our sensing, feeling selves, allowing us to access something of the unmediated and the ineffable, through the possibility of immersion and attunement that it can afford us. Artistic expression, when used as a skillful means, also has the formidable capacity to be at once disruptive and generative — rhizomatic in the Deleuzian sense — and to coax us beyond the edges of our own habitual ways of understanding self and world. And most importantly, perhaps, by activating our sensitivity to the world around us, the arts can reawaken our capacity to care and to respond, bringing us into contact with our ethical selves. Whether or not we subscribe to the Wittgensteinian precept that “ethics and aesthetics are one,” it would seem that each necessarily lives in

relationship with the other, and productively so: aesthetics laying claim to a certain form of *responsiveness*, via sensory perception, and ethics shaping such responsiveness into *responsibility*. Where there is art, there is the possibility of entering a territory where conceptual thinking and traditional moral discourse cannot easily reach.

What do we mean by art?

Art, here, is first and foremost *praxis*, process, play, peregrination. It may involve performance and publication, or it may not. It is a co-creative relationship with the self, with knowing, and with the world. It is reflexive: by doing, we come to a form of knowing, which in turn informs our ways of doing. It is a vehicle for creating communities of practice, which become like soil for new ideas to emerge. It is contemplative as much as it is action-oriented; solitary as much as it is communal. It is, in the widest possible sense, the aesthetic dimension that hums in the background of human experience, often imbued with wonder, beauty, and, hopefully, a sense of awe.

Art & Enaction

Many artists who encounter enactive thought report experiencing something of a homecoming, recognizing in enaction many of the principles that have implicitly been at work in their creative processes since the beginning. Indeed, art could be said to *enact* many of the finer points of enaction as a theoretical outlook, if we take one of its central tenets to be that “cognition is not representation of a pregiven world by a pregiven mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs.” (*The Embodied Mind*, 2017, p. 9) Artistic practice shows us something essential about enaction from an experiential perspective, while also intimating an epistemological framework not unlike that of enaction, which emphasizes listening, circularity, complexity, valence, and sense-making:

- Artistic practice prioritizes a form of knowing that cannot be easily objectified: intuitive knowing, sometimes pre- or non-verbal knowing, knowing accessed through the 'felt sense' (cf. the work of Eugene Gendlin, Donata Schoeller and colleagues).
- It posits a fundamental circularity between creator, creation, and experiencer (or: self, environment, and other).
- It enacts *par excellence*, through movement, orality, sound, performance. “The body is the medium for having a world,” said Merleau-Ponty. The body is the medium for having art, one could say.

- Because art is one of those rare domains in modern life that gives us full permission to feel, notably through our sensorimotor sensitivities, it gives us access to what has come to be known as the “4E” way of seeing the world, one which is eminently embodied, embedded, extended, and enacted.

It would seem natural, then, to consider arts and aesthetics from within the enactive fold, not as something separate or ancillary, but as something that has been woven throughout since the beginning. Not only have numerous artists taken up the enactive approach explicitly in their own work (cf. the early Alpbach seminars: Joseph Beuys, Robert Filliou, Louwrien Wijers; the Fluxus movement; Olafur Eliasson; etc.), art at its best and fullest is a prime expression of enactive modes of knowing and being-in-the-world (one can immediately think of poetry (*poíēsis*), certain forms of dance and theater, or musical improvisation).

In the years ahead, we hope not only to consider artistic practice as a generative, enlivening, and accessible playground for enactive thought, but also as a means of coming into contact with the ethical and relational dimensions of life on this planet — a paramount concern for us at MLE.