

Art and Anthropology for a Living World

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Art and Anthropology for a Living World

How should we live? What are the conditions and possibilities of life in this one world we all inhabit? Human ways of life – ways of doing and saying, thinking and knowing – are not handed down on a plate; they are not pre-ordained, nor are they ever finally settled. Living is a matter of deciding how to live, and harbours at every moment the potential to branch in different directions, no one of which is any more normal or natural than any other. Human life, we could say, is the never-ending and collective process of figuring out how to live. Every way, then, represents a communal experiment in living. It is no more a *solution* to the problem of life than is the path a solution to the problem of how to reach a destination as yet unknown. But it is an *approach* to the problem.

Imagine a field of study that would take upon itself to learn from as wide a range of approaches as it can; one that would seek to bring to bear, on this problem of how to live, the wisdom and experience of all the world's inhabitants, whatever their backgrounds, livelihoods, circumstances and places of abode. This is the field I call it *anthropology*, and I do reckon myself to be an anthropologist. Yet it often seems to me that the people who are really doing anthropology, these days, are artists. Not all artists, to be sure, and I don't wish to get dragged into the pointless question of what is art and what is not. Few questions have generated a more boring and self-defeating literature. We can ask, however, what makes art anthropological – that is, on what common principles art and anthropology converge. For me, there are four such principles.

The first is *generosity*. Art that is anthropological pays attention to what others do and say, receiving with good grace what is offered rather than seeking by subterfuge to extract what is not. It is at pains to give back what we owe to others for our own intellectual, practical and moral formation.

The second principle is *open-endedness*. The aim is not to arrive at final solutions that would bring life to a close but to reveal paths along which it can keep going. Art that is anthropological is committed in this sense to sustainability. By this I don't mean rendering

the world sustainable for some to the exclusion of others, but rather a world that has room for everyone and everything.

The third principle is *comparison*. This is to recognise that no approach to life is the only possible one, and that for every approach you take, others could be taken which lead in different directions. Thus the question 'why this direction rather than that?' is always uppermost in our minds.

Finally, art that is anthropological is also *critical*, in that we cannot be content with things as they are. By common consent, the organisations of production, distribution, governance and knowledge that have dominated the modern era have brought the world to the brink of catastrophe. In finding ways to carry on, we need all the help we can get. But no-one - no science, no philosophy, no indigenous people - already holds the key to the future if only we could find it. We have to make that future together, by and for ourselves. This can only be achieved through dialogue, through conversation. That is to make a conversation of human life itself.

Art that is anthropological, then, is generous, open-ended, comparative and critical. It is inquisitive rather than interrogative, offering a line of questioning rather than demanding answers; it is attentional, rather than fronted by prior intentions, modestly experimental rather than brazenly transgressive, critical but not given over to critique. Joining *with* the forces that give birth to ideas and things, rather than seeking to express what is already there, art that is anthropological conceives without being conceptual. Such art rekindles care and longing, allowing knowledge to grow from the inside of being in the conversations of life. That's why practices like walking, drawing, calligraphy, instrumental music, dance, ways of making and working with materials - ways that tend to get bracketed at the 'craft' end of the spectrum - are exemplary for me. Artists engaging in these practices come closest, in my view, to doing real anthropology, even if they do not self-consciously present their work as such.

For the past five years, a group of us based at the University of Aberdeen, in Scotland, have been experimenting with these ways of doing anthropology, which could just as well be ways of doing art. Our project, funded by an Advanced Grant from the European Research Council, is called *Knowing from the Inside*, or KFI for short, and rests precisely on the four principles I have outlined. The project's remit is broad, covering anthropology's synergy with architecture and design as well as art, but for the purposes of this presentation I shall take art in the broadest sense, to include not only architecture and design but also such fields as music, dance, experimental theatre and literature with which - though they were not part of our original proposal - we have nevertheless found ourselves deeply engaged.

Indeed over the course of the five years, the practices we have been involved in have been so many and various that they cannot be easily summarised, and I shall not even attempt to do so here. But just to give you a few examples, we have been learning the skills of basket-making, of working with stained glass, and of carpentry, in order to reflect

on questions of memory, light and colour, and the generation of form. We have been working with artists in the creation of large-scale installations from clay, with theatre practitioners in the investigation of song, breath and gesture and their expressive potentials, with glaciologists in their day-to-day exposure to the material of ice, and with soil scientists in their experimental efforts to restore the ground of the city. We have mixed concrete and explored its material properties, and how it behaves – especially when subjected to seismic vibrations.

We have worked with farmers and fishermen, alongside agronomists and biologists, in thinking through questions of terrestrial and marine conservation. We have looked at the relations between song and embroidery, dance and drawing, music and notation, architecture and geometry. We have joined with designers in thinking about surfaces and their transformations. And we have thought about how all of these things bear on issues of pedagogy and education. For if there is one common conclusion to result from all our inquiries, it is that the mission of education is, above all, the aim around which art and anthropology converge. For both art and anthropology, the entire world – its people, its things, its materials – is a university where we go to study, to think and to learn.

Within the anthropological mainstream, however, our approach to knowing from the inside remains controversial, to say the least. Indeed the majority of practising anthropologists have settled for something else, not education but *ethnography*. And the aim of ethnography is quite different from that of the anthropology I have just described. It is not to study *with* people but to make studies *of* them; not to learn *from* them but to learn *about* them. It is to describe, understand and interpret, in depth and in detail, what life is like for some people, somewhere, sometime. Of course this is a worthy aim, and I am not saying it is wrong. My point is just that it is different from the aim of anthropology. And for the same reason, it is also different from the aim of art, and from what we have tried to do in KFI.

Yet most attempts to combine art and anthropology, deliberately and self-consciously, have focused on *ethnography* as the glue that holds them together. These attempts have not, in my view, been wholly successful: they tend to lead both to bad art and bad ethnography. For ethnography's commitment to descriptive accuracy goes against the grain of art's more speculative ambition. Ethnography casts its gaze rearwards, art forwards. Moreover, art's turn to ethnography brings in train two preoccupations that do much to undermine its anthropological promise. Already spelled out over twenty years ago by the art historian Hal Foster, in a paper aptly entitled 'The artist as ethnographer', these are first, an obsession with alterity, and second, an insistence on placing everything in its social, cultural and historical context.

Let me begin with the problem of alterity. Anthropologists like to impress their friends with stories of their encounter with what they call 'radical alterity'. For some it is almost a badge of honour that confers the right to speak of otherness – of its political force or transgressive potential – with an authority denied to their less seasoned or adventurous cousins. It is a badge that many artists, consumed by what Foster calls 'ethnographer

envy', would dearly love to wear. This does beg the question, however, of how 'other' the people have to be in order that their alterity should count as radical.

The phrase 'radical alterity' comes from the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. It connotes an ethical stance which requires you to let others into your presence, to be themselves, without entertaining any preconceptions about the kinds of selves they are, and without in any way prejudging the terms in which you might begin to interact or converse with them. Thus otherness, at least to begin with, is *absolute*. It cannot admit to differences of degree, such that some people are more other than others. Yet in the very instant that anthropologists introduce *culture* into their conception of alterity, this absoluteness is compromised. For to say that people are of another culture than one's own is immediately to frame their difference within the terms of an imposed classification. There are people of our kind, and people of this other kind. We are setting them, the others, a priori, on the opposite side of a frontier between cultural worlds, ours and theirs. And this, of course, is to prejudge how we interact with them.

That people are different goes without saying. But is it their otherness that makes them so? Or to put the question in another way: which comes first, alterity or difference? For Levinas, alterity is given from the start. But I am more inclined to the contrary view, which we owe to Gilbert Simondon and Gilles Deleuze, namely that otherness is ever-emergent from within the matrix of relations within which all are immersed a priori. That is to say, it is a function of ontogenesis. Here, difference is prior, alterity derivative. We are dealing, then, not with a world of beings radically other to one another, as with Levinas, but with a world of becomings, growing, differentiating, coming together, and splitting apart. People are different, then, not because they belong to other cultural worlds but because they are fellow travellers with us in the *same* world.

Ethnography, however, predisposes its practitioners to put alterity ahead of difference. There is, in what is often called the 'ethnographic encounter', an inherent *schizochrony* - to borrow a term from anthropologist Johannes Fabian. In an encounter marked as ethnographic, we turn our backs on people even as we open out to them. We are listening for what they have to say for what it says about them. And afterwards, we will go away and write it up. In effect, this is to convert others into surrogates for an idealised project of the anthropological or artistic self. It leads to the coding of difference as manifest identity and of otherness as outsidership. And as Foster points out, this can be just a prelude for a politics of marginality from which others are effectively excluded, rather than one of immanence in which all can join on an equal footing.

This marginalisation of others is only compounded by the insistence on placing them in context. This, too, is to put them into the frame, to situate them, and in so doing, to neutralise the force of their presence. Thus understood and accounted for, disarmed and laid to rest, we are no longer troubled to attend to them or to what they have to say. Their contextualisation does not bring them *forth* to be themselves, but refers them *back*, to what anthropologist Alfred Gell has called the 'complex intentionalities' that are supposed to furnish them with their motivation. The ethnographer, then, joins with the art critic or

historian in providing an interpretative context, marking people and their productions with the imprimatur of their special expertise or creativity, and appointing themselves to the task of explaining their significance to a wider public whose sense of intellectual inferiority, vis-a-via the scholar-critic, is thereby reproduced. In KFI, this is just what we have tried to avoid.

For all these reasons, I do not believe an art that aspires to be anthropological combines well with ethnography. But what about science? If anthropology is tantamount to art, does it necessarily fail as science? Much of the answer to this question depends on what we mean by data. Literally, a datum is a *thing given* (from the Latin, *dare*, to give). Inherent in the idea of the gift, as the ethnologist Marcel Mauss showed in a classic study, is that one accepts what is given and reciprocates in kind. Herein lies the principle of generosity that is as fundamental to the practice of art and anthropology as it is to everyday life. But what today's scientists count as data have not been bestowed as any kind of gift or offering. To collect data, in science, is not to receive what is given but to extract what is not. Whether mined, washed up, deposited or precipitated, what is extracted comes in bits, already broken off from the currents of life, from their ebbs and flows, and from their mutual entailments. For the scientist even to admit to a relationship of give and take with the things in the world with which he deals would be enough to disqualify the inquiry and any insights arising from it.

It is precisely because of its bittiness that scientific data are generally taken to be quantitative. For only when things have broken off from the currents of their generation, and have hardened into the discrete objects we call 'facts', can they actually be counted. In their efforts to re-present what they have received, as gifts, in the guise of facts they have collected, anthropologists have insisted that their data are qualitative rather than quantitative. I am very uneasy, however, about the idea of 'qualitative data'. For the quality of a phenomenon can surely only lie in its *presence* - in the way it opens up or offers itself to its surroundings, including we who perceive it. But at the very moment we turn the quality into a datum, the phenomenon is closed off, severed from the matrix of its formation. Collecting qualitative data is like opening up to people only to turn your back on them. Generosity becomes a front for expropriation. And this, as I've already shown, is inherent in the schizochronic attitude of classical ethnography.

Let us compare a hard object - say a ball - with a squishy one. The first, when it comes up against other things in the world, can have an impact. It can hit them, or even break them. In the hard sciences, every hit is a datum; if you accumulate enough data, you may achieve a breakthrough. The surface of the world has yielded under the impact of your incessant blows, and having done so, yields up some of its secrets. The squishy ball, by contrast, bends and deforms when it encounters other things, taking into itself some of their characteristics while they, in turn, bend to its pressure in accordance with their own inclinations and dispositions. The ball responds to things as they respond to it. Or in a word, it enters with things into a relation of *correspondence*.

In their practices of joining with the people among whom they work and learning from them – what they call *participant observation* – anthropologists become correspondents. They take into themselves something of their hosts' ways of moving, feeling and thinking, their practical skills and modes of attention. Correspondence, whether with people or with other things, is a labour of love, of giving back what we owe to the human and non-human beings with which and with whom we share our world, for our own existence and formation.

Anthropology, then, can be a science, and so can art, in the sense of a science of correspondence, in which knowledge grows from within the matrix of our unfolding relations with people and other things, in mutual attention and response. And that's what we've been doing in KFI.

Two centuries ago, in Germany, Johan Wolfgang von Goethe proposed just such a science. It demanded of practitioners that they should spend time with the objects of their attention, observe closely and with all their senses, draw what they observed, and endeavour to reach a level of mutual involvement or coupling, in perception and action, such that observer and observed become all but indistinguishable. From this crucible of mutual involvement, Goethe argued, all knowledge grows. But contemporary attitudes to what is nowadays called 'Goethean science', in the technoscientific mainstream, are telling. It is commonly regarded with a degree of indifference bordering on contempt; its practitioners are ridiculed and its submissions for publication systematically rejected.

It has not always been thus, however. Indeed I have a strong suspicion that the virulent repudiation of what we could call the *science of correspondence* coincides in a way that is not accidental with the colossal expansion, over the last four decades, of globalisation and the political economy of neoliberalism. There seems little doubt that recent decades have seen a pronounced 'hardening' of science which can readily be linked to its marketization as the engine of a global knowledge economy. For the commoditisation of knowledge requires that the fruits of scientific endeavour be broken off from the currents of life. This breach is effected by methodology: thus the harder the science, the more robust the methodology. The effect of relentless competition for 'innovation' and 'excellence' has been to power a kind of methodological arms race that draws scientists ever further from the phenomena they profess to study, and increasingly into virtual worlds of their own making.

There can be no science, however, without observation, and no observation without the observer's attention being closely attuned to those aspects of the world with which it is joined. To highlight these observational commitments – to attend to the practices of science rather than its protocols – means recovering those very experiential and performative engagements which methodology goes to such lengths to cover up. For in practice, scientists too are immersed in the lifeworld, ever attentive and responsive to the rustlings and whisperings of their surroundings.

The chemist Friedrich August Kekulé, in a lecture recalling his discovery of the structure of the benzene molecule, offered this advice to every young scientist: 'note every footprint, every bent twig, every fallen leaf'. Then, he said, you will see where next to place your feet. For Kekulé, science was a sort of wayfaring, or as he called it, 'pathfinding'.

Corresponding with things in the processes of their formation, rather than merely being informed by what has already precipitated out, the pathfinder not only collects but *accepts* what the world has to offer. It is in this more humble profession, I believe, rather than in arrogating to itself the exclusive authority to represent a given reality, that scientific inquiry can converge with artistic sensibility as a way of knowing-in-being.

For in practice, scientists' hands and minds, like those of artists or craftspeople, absorb into their ways of working a perceptual acuity attuned to the materials that have captured their attention, and as these materials vary, so does the experience that comes from working with them. Surely in practice, scientists are differentiated – as much as are artists and anthropologists, and indeed people everywhere – by the specificities of their experience and the skills arising from them, not by the territorial demarcation of fields of study. Science, when it becomes art, is both personal and charged with feeling; its wisdom is born of imagination and experience, and its manifold voices belong to each and every one who practices it, not to some transcendent authority for which they serve indifferently as spokespersons. And where scientific pathfinding joins with the art of inquiry, as in the practice of anthropology, to grow into knowledge of the world is at the same time to grow into the knowledge of one's own self.

Where science and art converge is in the *search for truth*. By truth I do not mean fact rather than fantasy, but the unison of experience and imagination in a world to which we are alive and that is alive to us. It is a great mistake to confuse the pursuit of truth with the pursuit of objectivity. For if the latter prescribes that we cut all ties with the world, the former demands our full and unqualified participation. It demands acknowledgement of what we owe to the world for our own existence and formation, as living beings within it, as well as of what the world owes to us.

What we call research, I contend, is a way of sustaining this relation of mutual indebtedness. As such, it entails both curiosity and care. We are curious *because* we care. We care about the earth and all its inhabitants, human and non-human. We care about the past, because it helps us to better know ourselves and where we have come from. And we care about the future because when we are gone we want to leave behind a world that is habitable for the generations that come after us. In short, curiosity and care are two sides of the same coin. That coin is truth. Research, then, is *the pursuit of truth through the practices of curiosity and care*.

Now for many today, truth is a scary word, better kept inside quotation marks, if used at all. It conjures up terrifying images of the violent oppression wreaked, in the name of truth, by those who have appointed themselves as its worldly representatives or ambassadors. We should not, however, blame truth for the wrongs committed in its name. The fault lies in its totalisation; its conversion into a monolith that stands eternal like a

monument, timeless and fully formed. This rests on a delusion, on the part of its self-appointed guardians, that they are themselves *above* truth, that they are the masters of it, and truth theirs to command. Human history is studded with delusional projects of this kind, each catastrophic for those subjected to it, and each ultimately smothered by the sands of time.

Research, to the contrary, rests on the acknowledgement that we can never conquer truth, any more than we can conquer life. Such conquest is for immortals. But for us, mortal beings, truth is always greater than we are, always beyond what – at any moment – can be physically determined or grasped within the categories of thought. Truth is inexhaustible. Wherever or whenever we may be, we can still go further. Thus research affords no final release into the light. Remaining ever in the shadows, we stumble along with no end in sight, following whatever clues afford a passage. This is hardly conducive to optimism, to the belief – common among theorists of progress – that the best of all worlds is only just around the corner. But while it may not be optimistic, research is always hopeful. For in converting every closure into an opening, every apparent solution into a new problem, it is the guarantor that life can carry on. And for this reason, research is a primary responsibility of the living.

Now if research is the pursuit of truth, and if truth ever lies beyond our reach, then there must always be more to research than the collection and analysis of data. It must go beyond the facts. The fact stops us in our tracks, and blocks our way. ‘This is how it is’, it says to us, ‘proceed no further!’ This is not to suggest that truth lies *behind* the facts, calling for a superior intelligence armed with theoretical power-tools capable of breaking through the surface appearances or ideological mirrors that deceive the rest of us into thinking that we can already tell reality from illusion. Nor is it to suggest that it lies *within* the facts, as some kind of unfathomable essence that will forever hide from us, sunk into itself. It is rather to insist that what appear to us, in the first instance, as blockages turn out, when we search again – that is, in our *re*-search – to be openings that let us in.

It is as though the fact rotated by ninety degrees, like a door on opening, so that it no longer confronts us face-on but aligns itself longitudinally with our own movements. And where the fact leads, we follow. ‘Come with us’, it says. What had once put an end to our search then reappears, in *re*-search, as a new beginning, a way into a world that is not already formed, but itself undergoing formation. It is not that we have broken through the surface of the world to discover its hidden secrets. Rather, as the doors of perception open, and as we join *with* things in the relations and processes of their formation, the surface itself vanishes. The truth of this world, then, is not to be found ‘out there’, established by reference to the objective facts, but is disclosed from within. It is indeed the very matrix of our existence as worldly beings. We can have no knowledge of this truth save by being in it. Knowing-in-being, in short, is of the essence of research. And this is the kind of research to which both art and anthropology are committed.

This conclusion will of course be anathema to those who hold that true knowledge of the world can be had only by taking ourselves out of it and by looking at it from a distance.

For them, truth and objectivity are inseparable. It is indeed understandable that in a world where facts often appear divorced from any kind of observation, where they can be invented on a whim, propagated through mass media, and manipulated to suit the interests of the powerful regardless of their veracity, we should be anxious about the fate of truth. To many, it seems that in this era of post-truth, we are cast adrift without an anchor. We are right to insist that there can be no proper facts without observation. But we are wrong, I believe, to confuse observation with objectivity. For to observe, it is not enough merely to look at things. We have to join with them, and to follow. And it is precisely as observation goes beyond objectivity that truth goes beyond the facts.

Now in our present global predicament, to idealise research as the pursuit of truth, grounded in curiosity and care, is likely to sound incorrigibly starry-eyed, even nostalgic. 'Get real!' I hear you say. 'If you want to make a better world for future generations, then by all means try, but to make any progress you will need to secure funding, show results, and make sure they win over those of your competitors'. In short, to do research and succeed in it you have to play a game, the rules and rewards of which are determined by governments and corporations already locked into the inexorable logic of globalisation. This logic, however, has corrupted the meaning of 'research' beyond recognition. *Real* research, we are told, is about the production of knowledge, the value of which is to be measured by its novelty rather than by any appeal to truth. Most funded research nowadays involves the extraction of large quantities of 'data', and their processing by means of programmes into 'outputs' which - in their potential application - could have an 'impact'. In the neoliberal economy of knowledge, change and innovation are of the order of the day, since as the resources of the planet run dry and in an ever more intense competition for dwindling returns, only what is new sells. 'Excellent research', in the macabre language of corporate capitalism, 'drives innovation'.

True, much of the research being carried on in what is increasingly known as 'academia' is not geared towards immediate application. It is said to be curiosity-driven, or 'blue sky'. Scientists have been vociferous in defending their right to undertake blue-sky research, albeit at considerable public expense, pointing time and again to a string of discoveries that, only long after they were made, turned out to be of such practical benefit that we now depend on them for our everyday lives. But in the land of academia, curiosity has been divorced from care, freedom from responsibility. As a net importer of services, academia's income is derived from its exports of knowledge, but it is left to those who buy the knowledge to determine how it should be applied, whether to build bombs, cure disease, or rig markets. Why should scientists care?

This attitude, widespread among practitioners of the so-called STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), reveals the lofty appeal to blue skies to be little more than a smokescreen for science's abject surrender to the market model of knowledge production. It amounts to a self-serving defence of special interests increasingly concentrated in the hands of a global scientific elite which, in collusion with the corporations it serves, treats the rest of the world - including the vast majority of its

increasingly impoverished and apparently disposable human population - as little more than a standing reserve for the supply of data to feed the insatiable appetite of the knowledge economy.

Big science, multinational corporations and neoliberal globalisation have pushed both art and anthropology to the margins, and with them the question from which all inquiry must begin and indeed from which I began this lecture - *How should we live?* Big science is not interested in the question because it believes it already has the answer. But this answer is manifestly unsustainable, and we are already seeing and feeling the effects of this unsustainability all around us.

When the dinosaurs became extinct, it was the small mammals that inherited the earth, among them the mouse. Perhaps the most famous mouse in history will turn out to be the one that bit through an electric cable, putting the biggest machine in history - the large hadron collider - out of action for six months. The collider is perhaps the greatest expression of scientific hubris we have yet seen, dedicated as it is to discovering the final truth of the universe, one that will leave us - mortals - with no place to be. It is the delusional project of our time, truly a machine for the end of the world. But when big science collapses - as it is bound to do, along with the global economy that sustains it - art and anthropology, like that famous mouse, will hold the future in their hands. We must be ready for it.