Scotomia

Hans Theys

Scotomia

Nine Letters

Compiled by
Carla Van Campenhout
Introduced by
Victoria Parvanova
And illustrated with seventeen plates by
Max Pinckers

Tornado Editions

2019

Посветен на Виктория Първанова

No one seems to read or remember what they have written.
There is a historical or cultural scotoma,
a 'memory hole', as Orwell would say.

Oliver Sacks

We start something. We weave our strand into a network
of relations, but what comes of it we never know. (…)
That is true of all action, because we just cannot know.

Hannah Arendt

The sense of futility, of limited significance even of your
best, most ardent actions is better than the illusion of their
consequences and the attendant self-aggrandizement. (…)
The only law of history, I am afraid, is chance.

Joseph Brodsky

Let us no longer roam in this darkness, which will not be
dispelled by our vain theories: let us return to the fact, the
humble facts, the only soil that does not sink beneath our feet.

Jean-Henri Fabre

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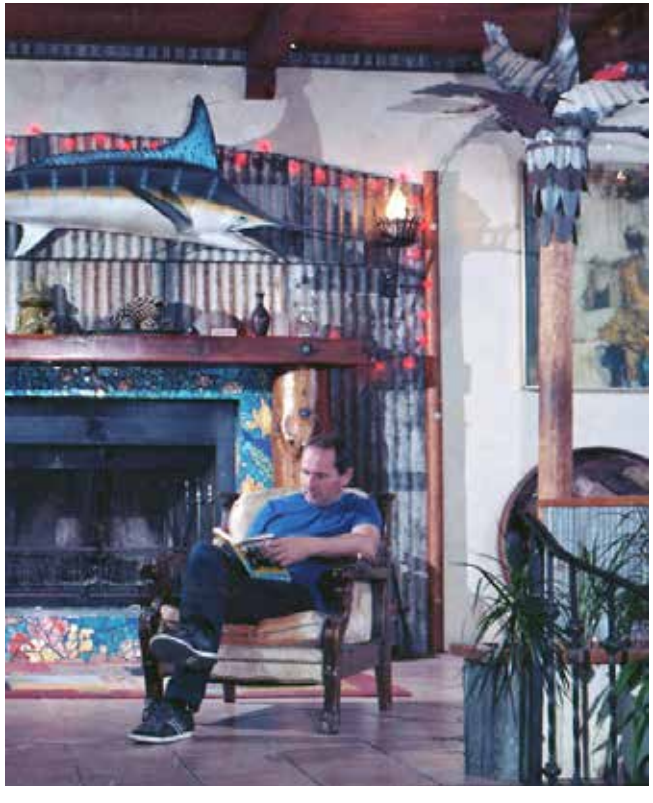


The author at Topanga Canyon, 2016

Foreword by the publisher

In this book, you will find a few letters of a twentieth-century philosopher and 'hippie from the eighties' who dedicated his adult life to the 'participatory observation' of artists. He collaborated with them in making their work, taking photographs, filming, setting up exhibitions and trying to report on all this in enjoyable books and readable texts.

What drove this man? Although we think we hear his voice throughout his writing, he remains invisible. What kind of life did he lead? What was his story? In search of answers to these questions, I had the idea of asking some of the artists closest to him to grant me access to their correspondence. Most of them were reluctant, as though in tacit agreement that the man should remain hidden or protected. In the end, I was allowed to publish nine letters, for which I would also like to thank his children.

These letters were written in quick succession, as if on an impulse. According to Victoria Parvanova, they formed the core of a book about the illusion of free will and the embrace of spontaneously evolved diversity. Bringing them together in this book does not seem unjustified, therefore.

I won't draw conclusions. I don't want to offend the reader.

Carla Van Campenhout

To Carla Van Campenhout

26 September 2019

Dear Carla,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to write an introduction to this 'insignificant book' – as the author used to describe his own work. I don't have the time to read all of it, because I am in the middle of sorting out my belongings, but I will do the best I can, basing myself on what I remember from the author's complaints while writing the letters.

In the period the selected letters were written, I was hired to put the author's archives in order. That's how I witnessed his working process. In the beginning, he wanted to make a random book out of all the letters he wrote on 21 July, the Belgian national holiday, but alas he could not find them in the chaos of forty years' worth of papers. Then his flirtatious relationship with truth gave him the idea to pick random letters and fake the dates. But finally he just sat down and started writing new letters. I am glad you made a rigorous selection.

The first letter is about Franz Boas, the father of American anthropology, who was chaotic, unprofessional and didn't have a single theory on which to base his work. Boas studied each tribe without preconceptions and observed their culture without any clear purpose. Also, he didn't apply the sound rules he set for his students to his own endeavours. Similarly, the author always advised his students not to work all the time,

but he himself worked day and night. From the letters to Vincent Van Meenen we learn that the author likened his open approach as an art critic to that of Boas. Thanks to psychology, however, we know that we cannot see anything if we don't look for it (the dancing gorilla experiment). The only real explanation for this kind of seemingly random attitude is that the author looks for something he is not aware of. In the beginning of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes that all philosophers who try to describe the world, simply describe themselves. Our vantage point is inevitably determined by our moral pursuits. If we do not have something to search for, a goal, then we cannot help but find ourselves wherever we look.

The second letter is an answer to the question, asked by a dear friend of his, as to the role of the artist. The author thinks that artists need to act according to individual circumstances, rather than basing themselves on theories. And if they have the unfortunate inclination to develop a system, they should always try to escape from it or revise it according to the new demands of the encountered reality. As an example of such attitude the author introduces us to the work of the photographer Max Pinckers.

The third letter originates from a remark I made about the author's writings, in which we can distinguish a red line that is essentially anti-racist. Normally I don't like it when art mingles with politics, but the author did it in such a poetic way that he could be forgiven. He always seemed to focus on what makes individuals unique. I remembered his enthusiasm for Jared Diamond's history of mankind and asked him to write about it. Happily, Vincent had asked him a related question, so the letter wrote itself.

In the letter to Miss X, the author speculates that while masculine oppression is just one possible reason for the fact that fewer women are celebrated as historically significant figures, another might be that women are simply not interested in sacrificing their life for some scientific or philosophical achievement. I agree. As a woman, I don't feel under any pressure to achieve something beyond being beautiful, kind and virtuous. I feel praised enough for just being my beautiful self. I see the difference in the way my family treats my brother, for example, who is expected to achieve something outside of 'working on himself' and this causes him great anxiety and thoughts which should not occur to a 20-year-old boy. I believe he is not the only man to undergo this experience.

Whether this is due to nature or culture is not clear to me yet, those are simply my observations, and for once they match those of the author. I feel that looking at these matters from this angle can be soothing for some women, who are overcome by anger and frustration, or feel deprived and mistreated. Let's be honest: who wants to shut herself in a room writing a thesis about Kant's aesthetics, for example, when she could spend that precious time on her nails, hair, boyfriend(s) and fun things of that sort? Let us not pretend not to know that the world is held together by the love and care which women have always sprinkled around themselves. This phenomenon escapes the historical record, but we all know that it has always been there and will never disappear. No need to record something which is always there, steady and powerful. While I don't think we should get carried away with too much feminism, we should try to remove the unnecessary pressure and crippling preconceptions of both men and women.

In the letter to Miss Y, I don't like the way in which the author throws a shade on the holy calling of teaching, a blasphemy that he also indulges in even more lavishly in his letter to Idris. But I see why you wanted to include the letter in the book. It could possibly save lives.

The letter to Max and Victoria speaks about the neurologist Oliver Sacks, who never treated two patients the same way. He always started working with the patient based on his or her personal story. Similarly, the author, who was an art critic, tried to approach artists as unique individuals rather than as a type. He tried to discover their specific way of seeing and making. However, in this letter the author identifies with Oliver Sacks on a more personal level, presenting us with the strange theory that they both had the same type of mother. He thinks that both mothers were highly gifted intellectually. From an evolutionary point of view, he thinks that the mothers of the mothers have survived, because they could remember where the mushrooms grew last year: they were trackers. Hans and Oliver have inherited this urge for wayfinding from their mothers, but alas, at least in the case of the author, not the talent for it. Like my father and I, who much to the regret of my mother, have inherited my grandfather's urge to play music, but not an ounce of his musical talent.

Carla, I don't really want to talk about the letter to his father; it made me cry. I don't know what the author meant or why he wrote it, but I think it is a real work of art, one that can be interpreted in many ways, so it means something different to everyone who reads it.

The author often seems to feel lost. I am young and pretentious enough to think that I know why. He believes that the world is based purely on chance, but he is wrong. The world is a result of the courtship between chaos and order, neither of which dominates the other. This is the principle of existence and the origin of life.

Despite the author's flawed way of thinking, we can get a great benefit from reading his writings because they tell us not to cling to crippling theories, not to have preconceptions and not to worry about not knowing what to search for. They invite us to really *look*: at a work of art, at a person, at a problem, at anything at all.

It is safe to follow a well-trodden path, to live our life as our mother and our mothers' mothers did, but it won't allow us to discover anything new. It requires courage to really look and really live. And if not the talents of his mother, some courage the author certainly had.

Dear Carla, I hope that this will do for an introduction. I would appreciate some feedback if you get a chance to write back. Have fun in beautiful Hawaii!

Yours,

Victoria

To Vincent Van Meenen

Wednesday 10 July 2019

Dear Vincent,

What does it mean to be spiritual? I believe that in all cultures it means reconciling ourselves with our materiality, with our overly short arms, with our ignorance. Even in Roman times when the ideal of masculinity and vigour was a just another way of initiating action in an unknowable world.

My letter had to start with the above stumbling block, because the world seems incredibly dark right now, leaving me unable to do anything else but seek spiritualization or acceptance. I want to keep going, because I need to keep going to take care of my little girl, now almost six years old, whom I've brought along with me on this crazy journey.

Do you still remember visiting Wayne Stild's beautiful exhibition last week and my purchase of a hardback book, decorated with the image of a winged god with an eagle's beak and crab claws? 'Are you going to read this?' you asked. Which I understand, because you're young and still believe that literature is the only source of salvation, whereas I seek it amongst the richness of nature and history: those two vast terrains where chance has conducted endless experiments.

And a cheerful book it is, you'll have to acknowledge. Because what is it about? The authors' starting point is the observation that the ethnographer Franz Boas

(1858-1942), the father of American anthropology, is often accused of sloppiness and a lack of precision, especially since nobody knows how he acquired his 'material'. To find out, the authors read through thousands of pages of correspondence and diary entries in which the diligent German reported on his adventures. In a final review, which is published in the beginning of the book, the authors draw their conclusions: Boas advocated learning the language of the population group being studied, but never did so himself. Half of all his publications deal with the Kwakiutl people, yet he never mastered their language (he communicated with them in a kind of lingua franca called Chinook). He also thought it important for researchers to live on the spot, but he himself preferred to stay in nearby hotels. And much of his information about the Kwakiutl was drawn from his correspondence with a man named George Hunt, who sourced and collected information on his behalf.

Nevertheless, Boas made a significant contribution to anthropology, for example by inspiring and educating his students (e.g. Margaret Mead). But how? As a supporter of an inductive, empirical method, he always maintained his suspicion of theories. One of the theories that he fought hardest against as a young man was the idea that cultures were determined by genetic characteristics. By collecting and measuring skulls from multiple cemeteries, he was able to prove that their shape was probably also determined by environmental factors and could, in any case, vary greatly within a single community. On 3 July 1888, half a century before the terrible events in Germany, he wrote in his diary: 'The two Sutton brothers live in a small house and pursue "phrenology" beside their business. Of course I refrained from saying anything about the nonsense of phrenology. In the course of years I have

acquired the curious habit of listening to all manner of opinions without agreeing or opposing.'

Boas' actual notes (i.e. not his publications but everything he collected and transcribed) form a colossal corpus of material – full of Chinook and indigenous words – which are probably as incomprehensible, contradictory and impenetrable as the cultures he was striving to chart. The letters and diaries are somewhat ludicrous because of the precision with which he recorded his every movement. Rarely does he describe anything specific. He mentions a 'strange' word, a 'strange' song, a 'strange' story or a 'strange' mask on countless occasions but without ever explaining the exact nature of the strangeness. It seems as though its mere identification was justification enough for his efforts.

And what efforts! Day after day he tries to find suitable informants, visiting prisons if necessary, in which there was always a good chance of finding an Indian. But often these informants can't be found, or they arrive a day too early or late, or he finds them semi- or totally inebriated. In the evening, he complains about yet another lost workday, filled with useless travelling, pointless waiting around or an almost worthless harvest. In a beautiful letter to his wife, written halfway through a three-month separation, he announces that he will have plenty of work upon his return and concludes with the sentence: 'Seven weeks from today I shall be with you. I only wish that I would not have to leave you again. I think I have fulfilled my duty toward this kind of work and hope that I can turn again to… work.'

A bit of an ethnographer could deduce much from these letters and diaries about the neurotic culture

that gave rise to the 'strange' activity of this industrious ant. About the 'strange' importance he attached to birthdays, for example. It is fascinating to note that Boas kept a flawless overview of the availability of the telegraph and the comings and goings of stagecoaches, steamships and transatlantic boats, all of which had to deliver his birthday wishes on time. In a diary-like letter to his parents dated 26 September 1886, he writes: 'If things continue to go so badly, I shall hurry away from Victoria; I do not wish to hang about in vain. I was very tired at night from running about so much and went to bed in a bad humor. That was a profitless day's labor. (…) I am unhappy for every moment lost, but one cannot butt one's head against a stone wall; I must bear these fruitless hours patiently.' And three days later: 'On my visits to these homes I usually find the women busily engaged in household duties or busily being lazy.' And the next day, 'I arrived with my usual promptness'. I must confess, it's all very 'strange'. And infinitely worthy of ethnographic research.

A Kwakiutl ethnographer would probably also be intrigued by Boas' need to measure people and collect skulls. We know that he was trying to 'prove' that culture was not genetically predestined, but was it really necessary to desecrate so many cemeteries? He measured thousands of people! ('Today I measured 98 persons.' *Diary to Parents*, July 4, 1890.) And what didn't he conjure up as a pretext for stealing skulls! On 29 June 1888, he writes in his diary: 'The photographer had returned, and I persuaded him to go with me to a small island in the vicinity and photograph the village while I tried to get a skull. I wanted him to do this in order to distract their attention. (…) Of course I did not tell the photographer (a stuttering idiot) what I wanted until we were there. I took a skull and the entire lower portion of a man. (…) It is very sad that I

don't have more Tsimshian skulls. I want to make another attempt with a traveling watchmaker who earns his living repairing Indian watches, but I have no idea whether he will be able to accomplish such a thing.'

Before I continue my argument, I'd like to tell you something about the literary content of these diaries and letters. Not only when Boas informs us of his finding that all the Scots he meets are religious, give expression to this religiosity in the same way and have a deeply emotional life, and wonders to what this might be attributed since they don't even know each other personally… And not only when on 13 July 1888 he complains about how singing Salvation Army people made his train journey unbearable. But certainly when he visits a potlatch and recounts that the revellers believe him to be 'a government agent' who will ban their festivities (as in Gogol's play) and says that the host 'chopped up his new boat and used it to make a fire to show his importance'. A practice that will hopefully be adopted by our wealthy fellow citizens, sawing up their flashy cars every year in order to weld them into improvised barbecues, climbing frames or totem poles.

And after this intermezzo, I must get to the heart of my argument, knowing that you yourself have long expressed it in silence, of course, as a diligent reader of my last books. It is true that over the past thirty-five years I have kept myself busy, in the same neurotic way as Boas, with the collection of data, the corpus of which has grown to such an extent that no one can ever oversee it again, so that it is reminiscent of a map as large as the territory it describes, and is therefore useless. I'm now convinced, after reading about Boas' adventures, that had a nineteenth-century 'native American' come up with the idiotic idea of using conversations with individuals to formulate a theory about

the cultural habits of Europeans or Scots or art historians like myself, this might have resulted in a picturesque novel à la Rabelais, or a myth along the lines of Don Quixote de la Mancha's spiritual adventures, but certainly not in an endless arguing and harping on about how many angels can waltz on the tip of a pin without tripping over the tips of each other's wings.

After a long and tiring day, surrounded by noisy Southern Europeans, I realise only too well how lucky we are to have such a rich organ of speech at our disposal, one that has made it possible for language to develop and for people to think in nuanced ways, but equally how this abundance of sounds is man's greatest scourge, his greatest loss, his gravest error, with all that endless whining, chattering and raving, either verbally or in writing, without inhibition, restraint, brakes or restraint. And it was precisely this banter that Boas set out to investigate! He didn't go to a village to slowly discover which customs, rules and laws had saved the people from perishing or being annihilated by bickering, war or famine. No, he visited people and allowed them to tell him the origins of stars, ants and grass seeds, not realising that he was constantly being fooled by men and women who were much smarter and far less neurotic than himself.

And here, too, I hear you smiling, dear friend. Because don't all these artists do the exact same thing to me? Don't they talk to me in the hope of keeping their little secrets hidden for as long as possible? Of course they do. And so my whole life appears to us as a farce, a ridiculous undertaking, a deep sigh.

For what connects me in the first place to the father of American anthropology? Our aversion to theories, of course, and our penchant for the 'empirical induction'

that long ago prompted me to limit myself to collecting data on the work of contemporary artists, in the hope that some academic might be able to do something with it at some point. But why? Why did Boas venture forth? Why didn't he just sit behind his desk somewhere in Germany? Why do some men become trackers?

Perhaps Boas saw no other way to make a living? Probably he wasn't given a desk at a university. It's easy for the rich to devise theories or attempt to disprove them, but men who must bring home the money to feed their children would do better to gather all kinds of information and to convince as many people as possible of the importance of their activities. At least, that's how it seems. But is this the real reason? Might there be some deeper motivation that momentarily escapes me?

And in the meantime, I travel onwards with my daughter from city to city, pressing ever further southwards, in search of an explanation for my loneliness, which seems to be Scottish in nature and no less problematic than the singing of Salvation Army people. Oh, who will grant me a peaceful village somewhere near the Rocky Mountains, where love blossoms, the fragrant fruit hangs heavily from low trees and the roasted and seasoned fowl flies straight into your mouth? And where everyone needs a love letter from time to time, which I will write for him or her, but only after a preliminary in-depth conversation of course, because one good turn deserves another, and any attempt to fundamentally change myself now is doomed to failure anyway.

Having said that, after receiving your tips on writing poems, I wrote a new verse in which I attempted to

articulate ‘my intimate relationship with language’, as your learned friend put it. It goes like this:

Butterflies don’t like cheese

Butterflies don’t like cheese
And you don’t love me, little butterfly.
When is that ever going to change?

Yours,

To Christine Tossens

Sunday 21 July 2019

Dear Christine,

Your long letter with thoughts on the role of the architect lies before me. I especially like the passages in which you talk about the attitudes of architects such as Santiago Cirugeda, Rudy Ricciotti and Luc Deleu. I prefer a concrete approach to things, for I am not afraid it will take me down a potentially never-ending path. Precision is only to be found in the concrete. General theories (except for equations) are always approximate.

You asked me to write something about the role of the artist. But I’ve been reading and rereading your letter for six months now without finding a satisfactory answer. I admit that your letter left me dumbstruck. What do I think about the role of the artist? Nothing at all, I’m afraid. You could just as easily have asked me what I think about the role of mankind. But I don’t have any thoughts about that either. People should behave properly, I’d say. But we know this isn’t the case. People aren’t decent. Their history is cruel, insipid, stupid, retarded and stupid.

Accept the world or create it? Can a world be created? Are we clever enough to do that? And free enough? Is there any such thing as individual freedom?

The only thing that sprang to mind was that the role of the artist (his or her duties, tasks, sense of honour

and aesthetic, ethical or political stance) is dependent upon the society to which he or she belongs. Artists in Afghanistan, Russia, China, Tibet, Israel, Palestine, Sudan or Los Angeles probably have different imperatives nowadays, depending on the political or environmental necessities. But this is, in fact, a rather futile and otherwise utterly useless thought.

Why? Because I don't believe in freedom? Undoubtedly. But there's something else. Something that I was unable to articulate.

Until tonight that is when, surrounded by scented candles to ward off the mosquitoes, I read several bright pages in a book by Jean-François Billeter. Billeter explains that Spinoza, in the seventeenth century, proffered an explanation for the many calamities that have befallen the Jewish people. It is a dazzling interpretation. First of all, Spinoza states that a people cannot possess a personality. Only individuals possess personalities. Yet these individuals are morally and intellectually determined by the culture in which they are raised: by its institutions, laws and customs. According to Spinoza, all of the troubles of the Jewish people can be traced back to the moment when Moses decided to separate the secular and ecclesiastical powers. In so doing, he laid the foundations for the success of the West, but also for countless disasters. Why? Because in doing so he created a clerical power that was able to recapture power from time to time, which led to all manner of catastrophes. The misfortunes of the Jewish people is thus the result of a system that works well, except when it doesn't.

It's a wonderful passage, one that corresponds to what I've distilled from my reading of Claude Lévi-Strauss, namely that all the current nations of the world owe

their survival to conventions that were based on chance (even if the symbols that were used were originally based on a thorough understanding of plants and animals), but were nonetheless effective. This is why he initially attempted to establish kinships when studying a people. The arbitrary conventions underlying these interpersonal bonds determined their chances of peace, unity and survival.

But Billeter talks about Spinoza to explain something else, namely our lack of understanding of China's three-thousand-year-old unity and the inscrutable ways of its politics. And he explains that a warlord who had seized power in China 3,000 years ago with the assistance of other warlords subsequently decided to declare all of these men his brothers. And in order to prevent the empire from fragmenting due to ever-expanding families, they devised an ingenious system of subordinate affinity that could include thousands of family members, all of whom knew exactly where they stood in the hierarchy thanks to annual ceremonies demonstrating the order of precedence, among other things. (One of the crucial concepts they forged was that of 'younger brother' or 'younger sister'.) In this way, a stable ruling class was established, one that floated above the heads of the populace, and of which only the supreme leader knew all the secrets of the rituals. And though a few interlopers have seized power during the following thirty centuries, they have always succeeded to maintain China's unity by applying the same ancient system.

Apart from providing a unique stability, this system also prevented the emergence of a separate ecclesiastical power that could occasionally mess things up, as has happened with the Jewish people. There was also a tradition of granting as much freedom as pos-

sible to groups that were not part of the ruling classes. Only when one group became more powerful than the others did an intervention occur, in which one of the groups would either be weakened or strengthened. (Billeter doesn't talk about it, but I believe that China's current foreign policy works along the same principles.) One of the consequences of this world view is that 'equality' never became a cultural or philosophical concept in China. The Chinese have different terms for referring to politics, but a word that equates to the 'polis' and the underlying idea that all voting Athenians are equal, is completely absent.

How should we view the role of an architect or an artist in a world that has been constructed in such a way? I'm thinking, for example, of the Gongshi, the scholar stones that were formed through erosion and have been admired by Chinese poet-painters for the past 1,800 years. An art object that was created without human intervention. Have we ever developed such a beautiful and refined art form? I'm afraid not. But who developed it? Artists? No. Or perhaps. Because here, too, we are speaking about a creative act. Yet this art form could never have emerged in the West. Our way of thinking forms too much of an obstacle. We lack the necessary concepts for such a thing.

This place is crawling with ants. The dry grass is riddled with their red motorways, free of obstacles, five centimetres wide. How do we differ from these ants? They don't know what they're doing, but they're doing it well. They're well organised. We don't know what we're doing either, but we're doing it badly. We're poorly organised. That's the difference. And where do artists fit in all this? They contribute as much as they can to the sloppy organisation. By depicting and praising God? Or by criticising Him? I'm afraid their

contributions won't be able to stave off the inevitable for much longer. But I hope to be proved wrong.

Yet if we read further in Billeter's book, we discover that once he's produced his brilliant analysis of the Chinese 'problem', he proceeds to offer the Chinese his advice! And what does he write? That they should endeavour to reconcile their traditions with a critical, personal version of modernity! And that they must return Tibet to the Tibetans. And so on. I couldn't believe my eyes. Unbelievable! First he demonstrates that the Chinese (the Jews, the architects, the artists) cannot think beyond their conceptual paradigm and then he tells them to change their way of thinking! Funnily enough (and very honestly), he adds a footnote in which he states that his mentor Louis Dumont has read his reflections and 'severely condemned' them. 'Undoubtedly,' he adds, 'our differing viewpoints are due to the role we are prepared to attribute to the creative imagination in relation to history'.

Do you understand that? After having demonstrated that China has survived 3,000 years by denying the value of individual thought (also for the artists), he proposes to 'creatively' rethink everything. But how? How can anyone think beyond the forms that give shape to this very thinking?

And to really pester us, Billeter writes a little further on: 'The only way to break this impasse is to change perspective and look at the Chinese past and the present in the same critical way, considering them as *two realities that can be transcended* (my italics). A reality that can be transcended! Who dares! For someone familiar with the writings of Spinoza, who described freedom as the acceptance of the inevitable…

And that's not all. Because deeply hidden within us, writes Billeter, we retain the ability to invent a new world. Because the Athenian democracy, the monotheism of Moses and the consolidation of the Zhou rule (1122 in our calendar) were also invented, weren't they?

Of course not. Those things weren't invented, they evolved, like most cities. It scares me to read a sentence like: 'at some point, reality will be born from our imagination'. That's exactly what the Communists believed. (May God save us from intellectuals who aspire to politics.)

Does this mean that I don't see the Western world as a painful masquerade where 'the power of an oligarchy is hidden behind a political spectacle'? But I do! I do! But therefore allow myself to dream about the 'invention' of a new model of society? My God! (I believe Billeter started by writing the end of his essay and then tried to think backwards to justify it, alas.)

The fact that we cannot think beyond tradition or the way our thoughts are shaped obviously didn't prevent Spinoza from existing and thinking. Or Rabelais, Shakespeare, Warhol and the Dalai Lama. But what about the role of the Dalai Lama? Do you see what I mean? Isn't his greatness related to the fact that he rethinks his role according to the changing circumstances? And this without actually being free?

Good. How, then, can we shape our duties, our obligations, our freedom, our responsibilities, our paths and our role?

I think that in all cases and in all circumstances we should think as tacticians rather than strategists. We

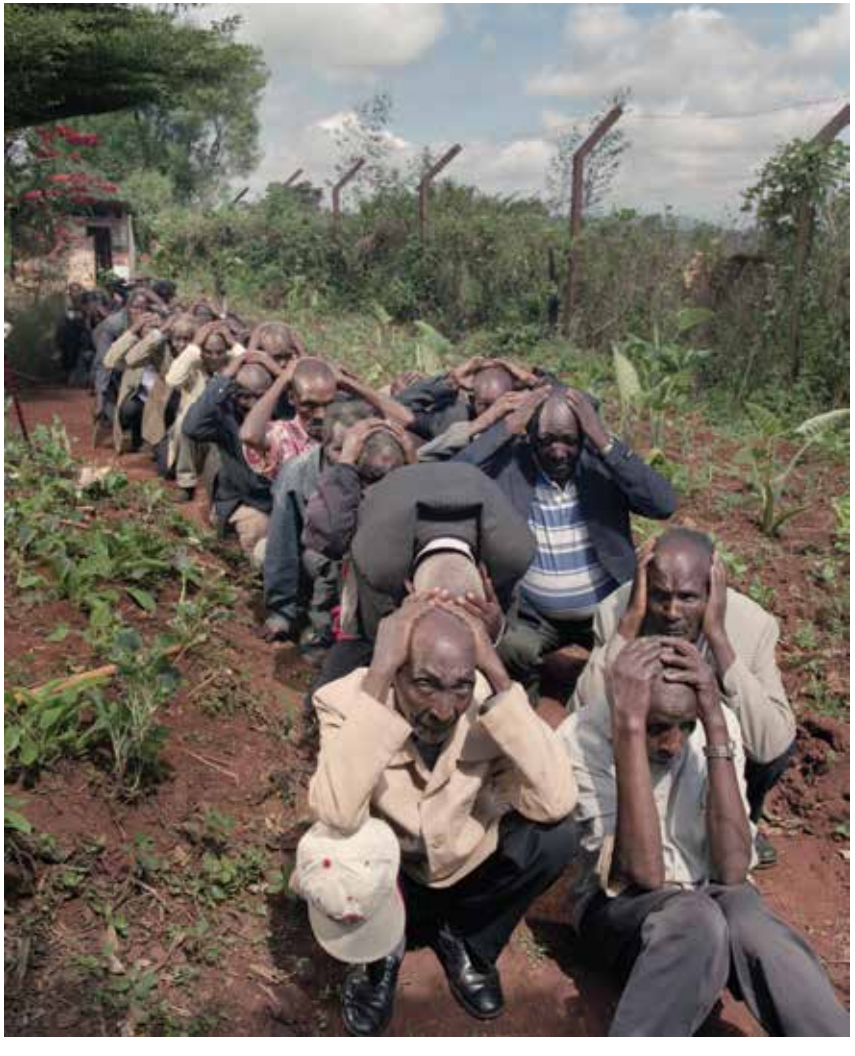
must try to solve specific problems with the maximum degree of openness. Every system and all approaches must be considered mere hypotheses, as potential directions, and never as certainties. And if an approach fails to deliver the desired result, then we should change course. None of which is possible if we adhere to an ideology, a theory or some kind of strategy.

If every architect would always do everything that was within his or her capabilities, then cities would grow as before – organically. And sometimes they would acquire some wonderful infrastructure or a circulation plan.

What about the artists? A long time ago, I used to say that the freest artists and scientists are not ahead of their time but amongst the very few people who truly live in the present. The others, I said, look at the world through out-of-date glasses. This means that artists are closer to what is concrete and possible than almost anyone else. They'd never be able to make anything new otherwise. Because they are closer to objects, to materials, techniques, people and circumstances, they have a better understanding of the difference between what is possible and what is necessary (inevitable). As a result, they can set us an example. But I don't think they have any tasks or obligations. Because any notion of duty presupposes an ideology, a know-it-all attitude or a strategy. Stupidity, therefore.

Yours,


Wherever it is
hard, to the
needy humans
God

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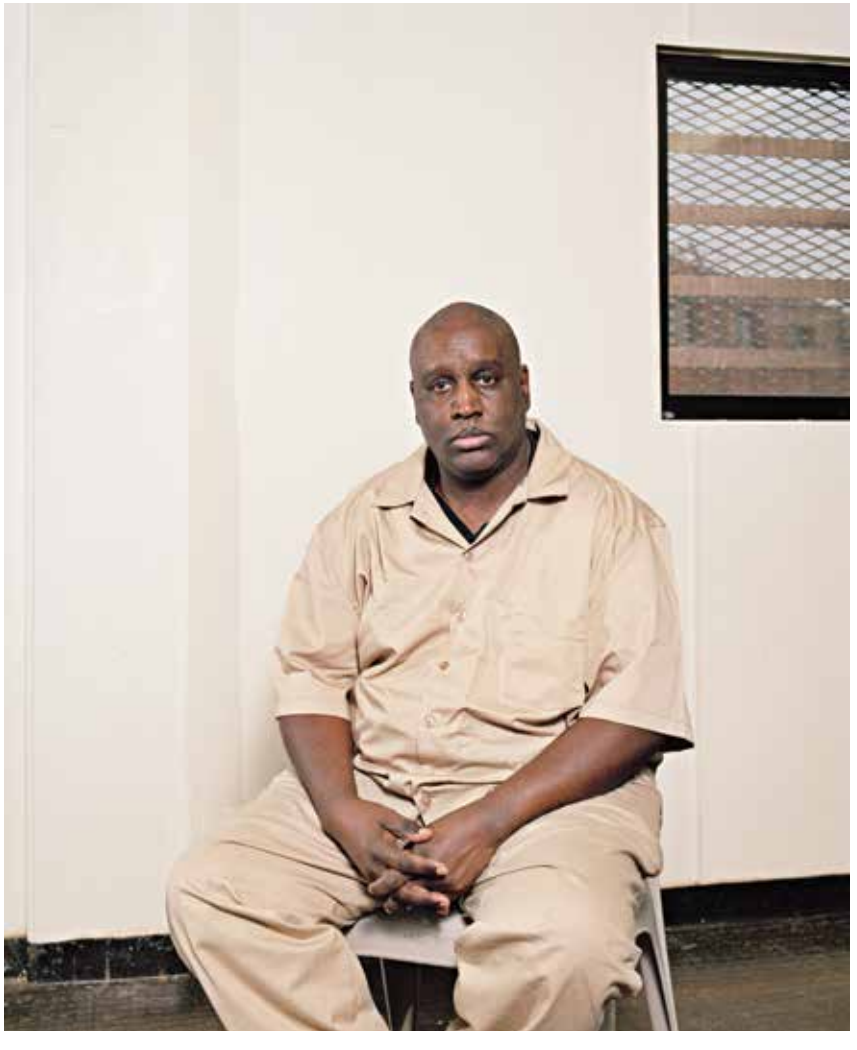

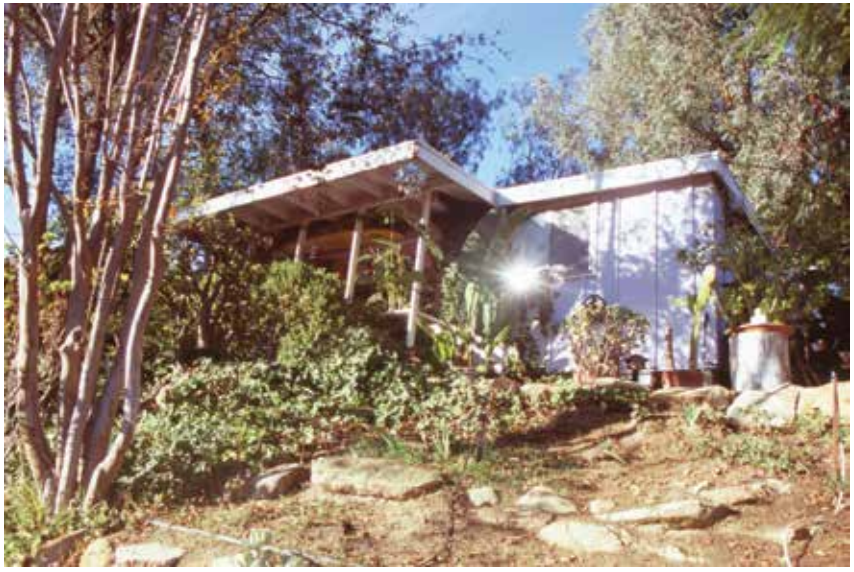

To Vincent Van Meenen

Wednesday 24 July 2019

Dear Vincent,

One more thing about collecting skulls. Franz Boas' intention was to demonstrate that cultural differences between peoples were not genetically determined, but a consequence of circumstances. A century and a half later, Jared Diamond has written a history of the world entitled *Guns, Germs and Steel*, in which he proves this thesis by showing that the greatest, most powerful and 'developed' civilisations owed their success to geographical circumstances. The most favourable spot was Eurasia, where advances could spread rapidly from east to west and vice versa (due to the lack of insurmountable obstacles such as oceans, mountain ranges, deserts or jungles), where animals roamed that could be domesticated and used for food, as beasts of burden or military engines (there are only twenty-three species on earth that fall into this category), and where several times they could domesticate two plants providing the necessary carbohydrates and proteins to survive through self-cultivated crops, to become sedentary and to feed the huge army of scribblers and soldiers that is essential to the organisation and defence of an empire.

The 'invention' of agriculture in Syria, for example, was probably due to the fact that a certain type of wheat occasionally produced a variant whose kernels did not drop to the ground. And these infertile spikes were

picked by passers-by, who then occasionally dropped a grain along the path, or who, when they got home, unwittingly dropped a few kernels in a rubbish heap, which was extremely fertile. The 'domestication' of grain meant that the grain-holding spikes were the ones most likely to be harvested 'unconsciously', so that the original shortcoming of the mutated variant (the grains that did not fall to the ground had no progeniture), accidentally boosted its multiplication.

'Let's begin by looking at domestication from the plant's point of view', writes Diamond. 'As far as plants are concerned, we're just one of thousands of animal species that unconsciously "domesticate" plants.'

During our visit to Jean-Henri Fabre's garden, we talked about the so-called 'meaning' of artworks. 'People always make the same mistake in their thinking,' I said. 'What do you mean?' you asked. 'That even a great spirit like Jean-Henri Fabre couldn't accept that natural evolution was arbitrary,' I said, 'that he thought an invisible intelligence was necessary.'

Agriculture has never been 'invented'; it flowed forth from nature. Variants of certain plants spread further because primates liked to eat them. That's all. People with a neurotic need to find an intention in everything would describe this phenomenon as follows: 'Certain types of grain mutated into varieties with tenacious spikes, so that they could be picked by passing primates and dispersed'. With the same facility, they would also deduce that our fingers have evolved so that we can sort peas and even that our arms have reached perfect length for harvesting wheat without having to bend forward.

I once heard a biologist say that the plant that is most successful in being dispersed by animals is grass. Not only do we sow it everywhere, but we also protect it from natural enemies such as moss and other 'weeds' and feed it copious amounts of water and fertiliser.

Recently, I saw ants dragging grass seeds along the red highways they'd been creating in an olive grove in southern Italy. In much the same way, we're all dragging grass seeds around. And why? What 'thoughts' could possibly explain this zeal? Why are we sowing all that grass? For the smell? So we can walk upon it? For a football pitch? Or just to admire it? My experience might be limited, but I have yet to meet someone who really 'enjoys' his or her lawn. Millions of people toil endlessly on their patch of grass, like brain-dead slaves to a plant species, without ever taking any greater pleasure in it, other than the illusion they have accomplished something worthwhile.

In all my life, I have only seen one person lie down in the grass and look at it from nearby, namely the melancholy exile Henry Selwyn, who counts blades of grass in the opening scene of W.G. Sebald's novel *The Emigrants*. Did he sow the grass himself or did it already exist? I think the latter. The grass was already there, and he embraced it. I'm glad he existed and that Sebald wrote about him. I even think there's a proof of God in this anecdote. For someone has seen the grass, which means that it has not lived in vain. All that manipulation of the human species has actually yielded something. There's justice after all.

And why do people keep off the grass? Because they're afraid of the ants of course! That's a fact! A fact? But facts don't exist! They are determined by our frame

of mind! Fabre didn't know what he saw! Yeah, yeah, yeah, but anyhow.

Good. I've said what I had to say. And I also want to say that I am very fond of you.

Yours,

To Miss X

Thursday 25 July 2019

Dear Miss X,

During the last academic year you called on all teachers of theory to 'recreate' the canon, because you didn't feel that the education system paid enough attention to historical female artists and philosophers. I understand your concerns. It seems as though all the women of value have been exiled to Scotomia. But is this actually true? Isn't the number of men whose life's work has silently vaporised a thousand times greater?

A canon cannot be recreated. Canons are like coral reefs: they are petrified cemeteries bearing scant resemblance to the living beings from which they originate. Schools cannot exist without these cemeteries. But why do you go to school? And why do you want to artificially build a new coral reef? Isn't one cemetery enough?

The fact that history resembles a skeleton doesn't prevent me from using both the pronouns 'he' and 'she' in reference to a person. I've written like this for the past thirty years. And my teaching is no different. I have also published just as much about men as I have about women. Being young, what you may not see is that this so-called canon doesn't really amount to anything. What good is a list of names and titles? Have you read the complete works of Virginia Woolf and Hannah Arendt? I guess not. What I don't think you realise yet is that one lifetime is barely enough to read the oeuvres of four or five predecessors, to fathom

these oeuvres, to make them accessible to others and to enrich them with one or two new thoughts or images. General overviews are useless. Only concrete studies make a difference. But you will probably never find enough time to read the major works by Sei Shonagon, Virginia Woolf, Hannah Arendt, Camille Paglia, Louise Kaplan, Louise Bourgeois, Karen Armstrong, Vasalis and Patricia De Martelaere.

A long time ago, long before you even existed, I spent ten hopeless years trying to find happiness with a woman who knew all the biographies of misunderstood female geniuses by heart. There were about thirteen or fourteen in total. The same names over and over again. And for the last twenty years of her life she worked on a doctorate about Marie de Gournay, adopted daughter and posthumous publisher of Montaigne, queen of Pyrronism. But now she's dead. (My great love, I mean, because Marie de Gournay was already dead.) And her work wasn't yet finished. Feminist or not, the Grim Reaper makes no distinction.

But good. Anyone who deals with the past will immediately notice the limited number of prominent female artists, authors and philosophers. What could account for this, other than the obvious neglect and concealment by the male clerks, historians and schoolmasters on duty?

I think there are two reasons. The first implies that spiritual or artistic excellence is not dependent upon male hormones, impressive moustaches or starched collars, but on a great number of competitors. I will touch upon the second reason in a moment, once I have scientifically explained the mechanics underlying cultural history as those of a slot machine.

First of all, I would like to stress that far fewer women than men were allowed to study, write or paint. Why? Probably because the rulers, who tended to be men, were afraid of them.

Secondly, I would like to explain why the number of practitioners is so vital. In his majestic history of the world, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, Jared Diamond explains why virtually every important discovery has been made in Eurasia. He wrote this book in order to disprove all nationalistic and otherwise racist arguments, which makes him a slightly subtler version of the great skull collector, Franz Boas. Actually, in this book, Diamond shows that *things discover themselves within us*. For example, agriculture was accidentally 'invented' in regions where certain mutations of crops benefited from being dispersed by primates. In my opinion, this also applies to art, science, philosophy and literature. Men didn't invent art and philosophy; these things thought themselves within them. The more women, workers' children and Kwakiutl become acquainted with certain subjects – albeit slowly and over a long period of time – the more they will 'invent'. It's a matter of accessibility, time and chance, nothing more.

To be honest, however, besides the smaller number of competitors, we should also mention a second reason, which I first heard mentioned by the sculptor Henry Moore (another man). If the Greeks were the only people to have developed the idealised human body in sculpture, he wrote, it is not because other cultures were stupider or clumsier, but *because they weren't interested*. Perhaps this also applies to a great many women, both then and now?

When Günther Gaus asked Hannah Arendt if she was hoping that her political-theoretical writings would influence politicians, she replied that this was a typ-

ically masculine question. 'Men always want to be influential. Me, I just want to understand. And if others understand something in the same way I've understood it, this gives me a sense of satisfaction, like a form of homecoming.' She goes on to say: 'I've always been old-fashioned; it just doesn't look good when a woman gives orders. She should try not to get herself into such situations…' She also states that in her (old Königsberg) family, every ambition was deemed to be vulgar. This reminds me of the Taoist sage, who doesn't act.

Finally, all that inventing and making is greatly overestimated. It seems as if a calculated reckoning has completely usurped our ability to think. But no matter how accurately you've counted the grain in your hand, when the last words have been uttered, the final thoughts gathered and the last emotions kindled, they will still slip through your fingers.

Yours,

To Idris Sevenans

Thursday 25 July 2019

Dear Idris,

If I understand it correctly, you've established a school for the visual arts and want to know how I would organise such an institution? In that case, your question comes too late, because I simply wouldn't start a school.

One of the first to criticise democratic education was Flaubert, who already in the mid nineteenth century was overwhelmed by the unstoppable stream of conceited ignorance that flowed forth from schools. Today, objective observers throughout the world have admitted that organised education only increases people's stupidity. Schools are a curse.

People used to know how to make a spade or bake bread. If someone wanted to acquire a particular skill, he or she would join a skilled craftsman, whose hands and tools they would scrutinise. Nowadays, no one believes that knowledge might exist beyond the classroom. Worse still, any form of erudition that falls outside the usual curricula and does not accord with the teachers' atrophied frame of mind is considered suspicious. One speaks of autodidacts. And people who struggle to read or write for perfectly healthy biological reasons are called dyslectic.

And schools are becoming ever more damaging. Why? Schools breed teachers. And what kind of people

are they? The ones who have the greatest talent for surviving schools. It's where they thrive. The school rules, the insignificance and ruthless high-pressure industriousness fill their heads and bellies nicely and pleasantly. Splendid! And anyone who doesn't fit in such a madhouse will be broken or crushed. And thus, generation after generation, schools become hollower and dumber and emptier and hollower. More and more rules are being invented, which have less and less to do with objects, hands and minds. Nobody really thinks, because fundamental differences of opinion are not tolerated. There is no investigation either, because it's almost always assumed that we already know everything. And everything has a purpose or a meaning that can be explained by the teacher. And what is the result? Schools everywhere are churning out right-wing voters, nationalists, racists, yobs, jackasses and yet more teachers. Never knowledge, never experience, never poetry, never lingering concentration, never a pleasing silence.

Anyway, let me answer your question or else it will keep me awake for the next few nights, or I'll be trying to write this letter in an interminable dream from which I'll awake exhausted tomorrow morning.

First of all, you should only hire teachers who belong to an association with a hierarchical structure. This way, you can be sure they're submissive people. Secondly, all of the teachers must be appointed for life and immediately join a trade union, so that they are untouchable until their well-earned retirement and can act in complete freedom.

Furthermore, they must all be members of a secret temple. The main goal of education, and therefore also of art education, is to ensure that the real insights,

based on actual experience and on close collaboration between people who truly master a discipline, are sequestered away and kept out of the reach of ordinary people. That is the role of education. It must place an invincible and impenetrable firewall around every useful form of knowledge and experience. The temples are crucial because they are based, in principle, on the submission and humiliation of the brothers and sisters. The first condition for membership is that you humbly beg for help in developing your so-called career. Bowing and scraping is the only way to secure admission. It is a beautiful and noble principle, because it excludes all forms of fudging or arrogance. Which is essential, because the primary objective is to protect the true and secret knowledge. All forms of free thought must be discouraged, prevented or eradicated. Since the aim is to elevate mankind, only mediocre, slavish people should be supported, so that everything petrifies, like a wall that cannot be demolished.

We're already on the right track. Thanks to continuous inbreeding, in which the majority of teachers are actually a product of the self-same education system, the amount of experience they are able to transfer has fallen to a safe minimum. But we're not there yet. Even today, there are still people who are adept in mathematics, reading, writing, playing music, painting and sculpting. Not many, but some. We have to reach the zero threshold.

In *The Murder on the Thirty-first Floor* by Per Walhöö, all of Sweden's leading philosophers, scientists and artists are gathered together in the same building and blown up. Rightly so. Finally, the best safeguard against sham knowledge is to completely eradicate any ambition to learn. The young Plato was no doubt conveyed to the Temple of Mysteries to learn that he

knew absolutely nothing. Later, he wrote that ordinary people live in a shadow world and in a state of semi-ignorance, which was considered to be a good thing. Real knowledge must remain in the hands of people who know how to use it. And who are clever enough to remember that they don't really know anything. The fewer attempts at knowledge transfer, the better. The less people believe they know something, the better. That's the only way to protect the world from their stupidity. But that's all I can tell you, or I'll get into trouble with my temple.

Before I conclude, I'd like to thank you for raising the question. I've finally committed a few thoughts to paper that might be able to stimulate a discussion during my classes. Because I'm a teacher, of course. Is there a more sacred profession?

Yours,

To Miss Y

Friday 26 July 2019

Dear Miss Y,

You write that you want to end your life because your studies in painting have robbed you of all joy. You have spent your entire life dreaming of becoming a painter, but your teachers don't stop discouraging, hurting and humiliating you. You want to know if I can see a way out of this. It's strange, but I'm suddenly reminded of a Bergman film that I saw on the BBC one night when I was eighteen years old. In that film, a vicar receives a visit from a despondent man who has put all his hope in the clergyman. I won't tell you the ending, but I do remember that the film has helped me. I had the impression that I was watching a work of art made by someone who had decided not to kill himself. And that gave me hope. It was weird, with those movies. There only used to be a handful of television channels, and people who couldn't sleep at night would surf between them, in the hope of finding a good image. Which is how one day I accidentally saw the majestic opening scene of Bergman's *The Silence* and on another day the mesmerising image of a windswept garden. Fascinated, I stared at the static frame, until suddenly, after forty or fifty seconds I think, a large boulder rose up and slowly disappeared out of the image. Without knowing it, I'd ended up in a Tarkovsky film. I'm writing this to you because these things do sometimes happen. When it seems as though everything is blocked, we notice a crack that lets in the light.

During my twelve years as a teacher in a sculpture studio, which seems centuries ago now, I'd occasionally be caught off-guard by a student who wasn't in the least bit interested in anything I had to say. I believe that your first task, as a student, is find out who teaches at a school. If they're not people you admire or trust, there's little point in surrendering yourself to them.

On the other hand, things often go wrong in art education, but if you understand why this happens, it sometimes becomes bearable. Teachers have an overriding fear of being judged on the basis of their students' work. And this is why they're always trying to get them to create things that resemble pre-existing artworks. But if you're young and talented, that's the last thing you want to do. You want to make things that only you can make and gradually, through remarks from outsiders, discover how they come across to other people. But for this you need teachers who are fearless, open-minded and unafraid of diversity.

A few months ago, without your knowledge, I had a look at your work. Two fellow students, who were outraged at the way you are treated, took me along. Your work is fascinating, because you are striving to unite disparate textures within a single painting, just like Vermeer and Manet. It's also wonderful to see you thinking about the pictorial space, colour and texture, while also trying to create works that seem to say something about your own life, as well as life in general. Their contrary poetry speaks of being out of place and resistance, whether intentional or not. Your work is as comforting as it is disturbing, too poetic and too sensual to be embraced by people who are lacking self-confidence. And you do realise, don't you, that a great many teachers (including myself) find it difficult to believe in themselves?

Maybe there's yet another way of looking at things. The Belgian-German sculptor Bernd Lohaus, who, together with the art critic Anny De Decker, ran an exceptional gallery in the 1960s, once explained their success at discovering great artists. 'If we didn't understand someone's work,' he said, 'we bought a piece and hung it between works by Beuys and Broodthaers. If the work lasted for three weeks, we invited the artist to dinner to get to know him or her better.'

Most teachers think the wrong way around. If they don't recognise or understand your work, they feel insecure. This might well be connected to our need to 'place' everything. An unidentifiable insect should be killed instantly. If we don't recognise the berries, we'll get a slave to taste them first. We want to know exactly what everything is. In the art world, we call this 'meaning'. 'What does it mean?' people ask. 'Why did you make it? What were you trying to do?'

Unfortunately, these questions overlook the fact that hardly anyone knows why he or she does something, that no one really understands his or her own intentions, and that nothing 'means' something. The 'meaning' is what we add to reality in order to cope with it. Artworks don't mean anything, just as trees or stones do not mean anything.

The delusion that works of art must have a 'meaning' is probably due to the fact that they are rooted in a tradition of religious artefacts that, because of changing social needs, had to be repeatedly explained in different ways by the priests on duty. Furthermore art is mainly written about by people who have never made anything themselves. They only start looking at objects once they are finished (and often only from photographs rather than the things themselves), and wrongly deduce that the artwork's final form corres-

ponds to a predetermined goal. We need people like that, of course. They can sit on a chair for years and are very good at bookkeeping. Very occasionally, a genuine author or philosopher might emerge from their midst. Their writings are often also very entertaining, but they have little to do with the things we encounter in the kitchen, in the garden, on the street or in museums.

Science is born from some people's awareness that we know almost nothing. This ignorance should not be celebrated, nor should we resign ourselves to it. But it is to be embraced. The way I see it, this is what works of art do. They reconcile us with our ignorance, powerlessness and mortality. Or they enrage and frustrate us. But under no circumstances do they tell us what to think or do. They don't mean anything. They simply are. And by existing, they speak about loss, about absence, about shortage, comfort, hope, joy, pleasure, delight, despair, anger, sorrow, loss, scarcity, loss, absence and absence.

Look at the mortality of your teachers, dear miss, and at their dreadfulness, short-sightedness, fearfulness, and helpless way of being. If this doesn't help and makes you even more nauseous, desperate or angry, then hasten to find an alternative path. Find another school or seek refuge with and amongst like-minded souls. Don't erase yourself. Your despair alone indicates that you must continue to live. Not to change things, but to make a film that my eighteen-year-old self can discover in the dead of night.

This morning I found an old letter to my brothers at the bottom of a drawer. Maybe one day it will mean something to you.

Yours,

Seven Sons (Letter to my Brothers)

The first became an architect, for building their house,
The second became a banker, for saving their money,
The third became a baker, for keeping the flour,
The fourth became a teacher, for guarding the secrets.

The fifth became a musician, for chasing away the night,
The sixth became a sculptor, for taming the ghosts
And the seventh did nothing, in order to think about everything.
(The father lived in the attic and the mother in the cellar.)

The first went crazy, because the house burnt down,
The second became a gambler, because he couldn't sleep at night,
The third became a glutton, because he couldn't sleep during the day,
The fourth became senile, because students are debilitating.

The fifth became a drunk, because you can't grasp music,
The sixth became a priest, because ghosts have to be celebrated
And the seventh kept thinking, because he was no good for anything.
(The father died in the attic and the mother in the cellar.)

The first met a hairdresser, who gently comforted him,
The second broke the bank and bought a casino,
The third went on a diet and became a chef in a fancy restaurant,
The fourth became the minister of education and then boss of the TV.

The fifth stopped drinking and became an organ player in Germany,
The sixth turned back to sculpting, because he was made for it
And the seventh became an art critic, for he remained useless.
(Sometimes they took a walk together and had a lot of fun.)

To Max Pinckers and Victoria Gonzalez-Figueras

Monday 29 July 2019

Dear Max and Victoria,

I'd like to add something to our adventure in California, some two years ago now. You crossed America by car, camping along the route, because you wanted to make a photographic portrait of the country, like many photographers had done before you. The first six weeks weren't a success because you couldn't get past the usual clichés. Until you had the idea of making documentary portraits of people who'd become famous for all the wrong reasons, which were connected to how they presented themselves or with the image that was conjured up of them in the media.

Then I remembered Oliver Sacks' autobiography and how he'd taken photographs as a newcomer to the US, but that he'd stashed most of the prints in a suitcase that he'd subsequently lost. Maybe we could travel to California together and try to retake his pictures?

I now wonder if there wasn't perhaps a deeper reason for my proposal to do something around Oliver Sacks. Did something inside me produce a thought without my permission? It's true that Oliver Sacks taught me a great deal about how to look at art and artists, without him ever having written about the visual arts himself. Amazing, in fact, for a man who was well-versed in literature (he was a friend of W.H. Auden), played the piano and was interested in the development of almost all the natural sciences.

Could this have subconsciously compelled me to introduce his work to you? The desire to investigate why someone who had never written a word about the visual arts had taken so many photographs? And why did he stop? And had he actually taken photographs? Or was he trying to map out the world? When Kate and Bill subsequently showed you the dozen black-and-white photographs that had survived, you noticed that they often contained text. I thought this might be due to his reluctance to photograph young men, and that he'd recorded his private encounters by capturing whatever they were standing next to. But perhaps he was looking for something else in those landscapes and texts? But if so, what? What urge was he trying to satisfy? What did he desire to make visible, if only for himself? Why was he travelling alone on his bike, with a heavy tripod and a multi-lens Nikon F or 4 × 5 Linhof? This is a young neurologist, a weightlifter and lover of asexual self-propagating ferns, who left his family behind in order to build a new life in the New World. Or didn't he leave his family behind? Perhaps he still carried it with him, like an inexplicable and elusive burden that drove him into the desert every Friday night, looking for answers?

I'd like to try and answer these questions introducing the concept of 'cultural scotoma', a term that Sacks coined for the strange phenomenon whereby medical doctors can suffer a decades-long 'blindness' towards the existence of certain ailments. The best-known example is Tourette's syndrome, which Sacks 'rediscovered'. He has often described how, immediately after his encounter with a man who described himself as Witty Ticcy Ray, he noticed three people with exactly the same symptoms on the streets of New York and another two the following day.

Sacks called this phenomenon a 'scotoma' (instead of 'selective blindness') because it reminded him of a genuine syndrome whereby the brain 'forgets' the existence of a certain body part (or even that it's needed) if it does not receive neural signals from this limb for a prolonged period of time. This is why people who undergo an amputation nowadays are immediately measured for a prosthesis, which they should use straight away. Sacks became aware of this condition when, after an accident, he found himself lying in a hospital bed and couldn't comprehend what the strange hairy thing under the blanket was. It reminded him of how he'd once found a young patient next to his bed on Christmas Eve, who'd been trying to push a strange hairy object out of it. Other forms of scotoma include the condition whereby people cannot perceive certain parts of reality, such as the left-hand side of a meal on a plate. They can only finish their food by training themselves to give their plate a turn if they believe it to be empty.

These extreme examples are vital, even if they seem highly improbable, because they explain how people belonging to certain cultures can be utterly 'blind' to certain aspects of reality. And I'm not just talking about the Chinese, or the Muslims and the Kwakiutl Indians, but also of the sinologist Jean-François Billeter, the so-called Muslim specialists, the ethnographer Franz Boas and all the analysts, experts, scientists, philosophers and art critics who try to map out and understand phenomena.

Is it possible to think beyond your scotoma? Is that what Nietzsche did?

I'd like to take Oliver Sacks himself as an example. You will recall that his mother, a surgeon, called him an

abomination because he was gay. This seemed strange to me, because she certainly wasn't a fool. Until I remembered that in *Uncle Tungsten. A Chemical Boyhood* Sacks recounts that she drove a car and enjoyed repairing clocks and leaky faucets. At first, I thought this might indicate that she had suppressed homosexual tendencies of her own, hence her irrational reaction to her son's sexuality. But I've since formulated another hypothesis.

But before I divulge it, there's something else you need to know about Sacks. I regard him as an incredibly important author, because as a medical doctor and writer he has shown how we can arrive at new insights (and help people) by immersing ourselves in what is concrete. Throughout his lifetime, he listened to his patients' stories because he felt it would always enable him to find a solution that would alleviate their suffering. A fine example of this approach concerns a patient who always stared out the window. Sacks couldn't fathom why, but asked permission to take the patient outside, in this case to the botanical garden, where he often worked. And this was how he discovered that the man knew a lot about plants, and it was where he felt most at home.

Viewed in this way, this story resembles a challenge for all doctors, scientists or art critics who, without realising it, approach reality from paradigms that steer and limit their gaze.

But we can also switch things around and ask ourselves why Sacks didn't want to think like everyone else. Why did he find it so imperative to deviate from the norms? Why couldn't he just act blind like most of the others?

An obvious explanation (although Sacks himself never mentions it) is linked to his younger brother, who was

mentally ill. Although his parents and all his brothers were doctors, no one could help him. Could this (unconsciously) have aroused a suspicion of conventional medicine, a distrust that forced Sacks into an eternal quest? We don't know. But what if we apply Sacks' method to the case of his own brother? What if we study his story? In *Uncle Tungsten*, Sacks explains that as a child he sometimes had stroboscopic perceptions of reality (migraine attacks), which were very upsetting. When he told his mother, she reassured him by saying that she sometimes experienced the very same thing. But did his brother also confide in their mother? Or, conversely, did the mother also reassure her youngest son, or did she forget?

Now, when we return to her reprehensible reaction towards her son's homosexuality and link it back to her habit of repairing clocks and fixing the plumbing, we are reminded of another strange biographical fact. Again, in *Uncle Tungsten* we read that she made her fourteen-year-old son Oliver dissect the leg of a girl of the same age. ('I did not know,' he writes, 'if I would ever be able to love the warm, quick bodies of the living after facing, smelling, cutting the formalin-reeking corpse of a girl my own age.') How could a mother who wants her son to grow-up loving women allow such a thing to happen or, worse still, organise it herself? Only a mother, I think, who looks at other people in a somewhat deviant way, a mother who is fascinated by the mechanism of a clock and by the pipes that turn a house into a seemingly living being: a woman who can cut into people because she sees them as mecanisms containing pipes. Behold a scotoma, I'd say.

My mother, who just underwent surgery and has difficulty walking at the moment, doesn't just make shopping lists for my youngest brother. She always writes

an extensive guide, planned according to the way you have to walk, one aisle after the next, in which she also describes the articles that she doesn't need because she thinks the additional information will help my brother pinpoint exactly the right product. For my mother, the world is a labyrinth that forces her to not only remember all the birthdays of everyone she knows (just as the anthropologist Franz Boas), but also every conceivable route to a particular destination. She is passionate about water management within her home but also knows how the water supply and drainage of the entire street is organised. I once saw her repair a photocopier, during which she used one foot to keep a door open at just the right distance for a certain manoeuvre that required both hands. She used to know the entire corpus of financial legislation by heart. But she doesn't know that her fifty-four-year-old son can find a pot of yoghurt without a detailed itinerary.

What would be the evolutionary advantage of such mothers? Sacks' mother was a gynaecologist, a learned midwife. Don't midwives sometimes have to make tough decisions? Don't we need calculated, vigorous women every now and then? And my mother, isn't she really a tracker? Someone who knows where mushrooms grew last year or where there's quicksand? And wouldn't that explain why some sons never stop looking for clues?

I don't like people who cling to rules and so-called truths. Sacks' attention to the concrete moves me. But how did his endless quest begin? Because he wanted to help his brother, because he never understood his mother or simply because he is a wandering descendant of a family of trackers?

And how about you, Max? Your intention to make documentary photos that disclose their subjectivity is

wonderful. But the way you find a fresh form for each new reportage is extraordinary. It seems as if you succeed time and time again in pushing the boundaries of what is possible, in breaking through the walls of our blindness and in reaching and depicting the actual people beyond all the nonsense. Always ad hoc, ad rem and ad fundum. Long live the trackers! And to the devil with schoolmasters! (A few days ago, 1,400 people were arrested in Russia for demonstrating against the Great Leader. The terror never stops, or so it would seem. But we continue to breathe.)

Warmest wishes (and kisses for Vigo),

To Herman Theys

Wednesday 7 August 2019

Dear Father,

Mr Keuner had several recurring dreams in which he met numerous people, some of whom became good friends. One day, he hit upon the idea of inviting them all into the same dream, which was planned for his birthday, so that they could all celebrate it together. This plan required a degree of preparation, because some of the dreams didn't recur as often as others, so it took a while for the word to spread. The big day was fast approaching. Mr Keuner was very much looking forward to seeing all his friends together and the forthcoming party was also the topic of the day in many a dream. But when it finally occurred, and everyone was in situ, it turned out that the friends were all different sizes. Some were extremely thin, because they came from narrow and timid dreams, others were huge, because they came from expansive, scenic dreams, and others were on the petite or even miniscule side. The collective dream therefore resembled a hasty cut-and-paste job and consisted of many misunderstandings and inconveniences, some of which were funny, while others were tinged with sadness. Since that day, Mr Keuner, who was called K. by his friends, has taken a great many steps to have his dreams harmonised. He has spent countless nights waiting at counters and in long corridors containing a solitary chair from the 50s. He has also attended interminable social functions during which he could never quite reach the person he needed. They were endless, these dreams,

and without joy. Gradually, the man also lost contact with his friends, whom he sometimes encountered in one of the new dreams, but never at an opportune moment.

Kiss,

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Colophon

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Photographs
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Drawing (cover)
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Translation from Dutch
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Graphic design
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Printing
Cultura, Wetteren

ISBN 9789079282203