

Like A Priest Who Has Lost Faith

Notes on art, meaning, emptiness and spirituality.
Jacob Wren – First publish in Etc 96

1.

Is it true that today, in casual conversation, artists often speak about wanting to have a career, but rarely speak about wanting to make something meaningful? Or is this casual observation only my cynicism rising to the surface? In the most general sense, the hope that art can be meaningful in people's lives brings it very close to the spiritual, and this might be one of the many reasons the topic is often avoided. If I say I want a career (which, of course, I do as much as any artist) I might come across as ambitious, but there is also something practical and down-to-earth in my pronouncement. If I say I want to make something meaningful it is a higher style of arrogance, more old fashioned, less critical and therefore less contemporary. The desire to make something meaningful brings along with it a thousand small distastes and taboos.

When you like (or love) a particular work of art, and happen to meet someone else who feels the same way, it creates a sense of possibility: for connection, for the potential that shared values might exist, that these values might be articulated (and questioned) in relation to a shared experience. This is the agency of the work of art, to draw you towards itself and open up peculiar opportunities for connection amongst disparate individuals. Such agency is rare. This possibility for unexpected connection is, for me, the edge along which art draws closest to the spiritual. Or to put it another way, a sense of ongoing connection, with friends or strangers, in relation to an object or idea outside ourselves, is the closest my thought gets to spirituality.

Let me attempt a rough definition: the spiritual is a sense that there exists something larger than us, larger than us as individuals and larger than us as humanity. There is not just us and what we see in front of us, there is also something else, and it is through this something else we are able to experience ongoing connections between us. This definition is so rough that, using it, we could easily say that fascism is a form of (debased) spirituality. And of course it is. If we don't get the real thing, if we are not allowed a genuine sense that the gods or spirits exist, that there is something otherworldly to believe in, we will search for every kind of possible substitute.

(I used fascism as my first example, but fear this was only empty provocation. Of course, using my rough definition, a more obvious example would be to say that a felt connection to the natural world – with plants, animals and eco-systems – is extremely spiritual. Many do, and at this point in our disastrous ecological freefall, it is hard to argue.)

Like many of us, I am in crisis (with one possible difference being that I have a compulsion to announce my sense of crisis as often as possible.) I am in crisis about art and also about everything else. There are many ways I have attempted to describe this crisis, but the one I use most often is as follows: I feel like a priest who has lost faith in god, but continues to give a weekly sermon anyways. This description has something to do with making performances, with the feelings engendered by getting up in front of a room full of people, people who are there to watch you, and performing something for them (or for yourself yet in front of them.) About the anxiety that what one is doing may, or may not, be meaningful to many of those present. The performance situation itself suggests a certain potential for connection among a room full of strangers, but this connection is bound to (at least partly) fail, because when the performance is over the connection is severed, is relegated to memory.

If the congregation believes in god, but the priest giving the sermon does not, there is an unbridgeable chasm of intention between what is being said and how it is perceived. If the priest believes in god, but the congregation does not, then one might wonder why they even bother to attend in the first place. Yet even if everyone in the room believes like crazy, there is always a paradox at work in the heart of the experience, since it is the belief itself, the faith and the fact that it is shared, that generates the sense of connection. And, vice versa, the connection that generates a sense of faith. A classic feedback loop. We feel connected to the people who surround us because we all believe in the same thing, and our belief is continually reinforced by our sense of feeling connected to each other.

All of this has very little to do with my actual experiences of watching contemporary performance or looking at contemporary art. I am much too secular, too isolated, for such examples to take on a life of their own. Nonetheless they are analogies that feel potent to me, that speak to a certain lack. When I walk into a contemporary art exhibition what is it exactly that I am supposed to believe in? How many of these beliefs am I expected to bring with me prior to my experience of looking at the work, and what aspects of these beliefs, these preconceptions, are necessary for me to be able to experience it?

I am astonished how empty I often feel after watching a performance or viewing an exhibition. I always wonder how many others feel this way, why more people I know don't speak of their experiences of art in these terms? It is as if everyone involved in art is simultaneously expected to be a cheerleader for the cause, to keep reciting the sermon every Sunday whether they feel it or not. You are allowed to say you want a career, but you are not allowed to say you want more meaningful art experiences. All of this, of course, makes me wonder what I would need from art in order to feel less empty.

2.

In his 1991 book *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour argues that the scientific separation between nature and human affairs that marked the onslaught of modernity – the revolution that severed the modern from the pre-modern world – in fact never occurred. Instead of clearly dividing the natural world from the human one, Latour posits that modernity formed around a series of crafty double games, playing nature against society and vice versa, utilizing critique of both past and present to generate complicated hybrids and paradoxes that become impossible to circumvent. For example, on the one hand modernity says “nature is not our construction, it is transcendent and surpasses us infinitely,” and “society is our free construction, it is immanent to our action.” But, at the same time, it also says “nature is our artificial construction in the laboratory; it is immanent,” and “society is not our construction, it is transcendent and surpasses us infinitely.” While these two positions might, at times, be debated by individuals on opposite sides of a given argument, when taken in their entirety they form a world view that is utterly inconsistent, and can utilize its own inconsistencies as a pretext to take power and exploit the natural world. While the modern might claim that primitives were full of irrational beliefs, Latour demonstrates that modern beliefs are equally (or even more) irrational, that they are matters of faith.

I recently became interested in Latour while reading an interview with him in *Animism I*, the first of two catalogs from a touring exhibition curated by the artist Anselm Franke. Two short sentences in an interview with Latour struck me with particular force: “What is the action of the gene? What does it do and where does it come from?” These questions occurred in the midst of a discussion on animism, when Latour decides to speak of animism not in terms of belief systems of previous cultures, but simply as the possibility that objects, and by extension the natural world, has agency. He imagines confronting a hypothetical critic of Franke’s exhibition:

Now, you are anti-animist. Does that mean there is no agency in the world? At all? Your interlocuter would say, yes, of course there is agency. Atoms have agency, cells have agency, stars have agency, psyches have agency; and then you begin to look at the specificity and the specification of all these agencies, and you realize that you begin to jump from one field to the other [...] So we begin to have a whole series of transports, of agencies from one domain to the other. Biology would be full of it. The whole question of agencies in biology is the gene. What is the action of the gene? What does it do and where does it come from?

I believe this question struck me so forcefully because it took me back to the anger I felt, in the early nineties, reading *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins. (The opening sentences of this text might well be subtitled ‘the selfish artist’.) The feeling I had that, in the wrong hands, evolution was little more than a tepid creation myth: once upon a time there were genes that wanted to preserve

themselves and these genes evolved and evolved until eventually they became people. The misguided anthropomorphism with which Dawkins speaks of these genes infuriated me, as did his misplaced anger towards religion, which in fact he only wants to replace with his own theory, a theory that is considerably less complex and resonant. It seemed to me that if Western modernity is going to have a creation myth, the very least we could do is come up with something helpful, something that offers solace, something that makes life better instead of worse. And then this well-known quote from Darwin: “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.”

Unfortunately, I have not seen Franke’s exhibition. I have only read the catalogue, which begins:

For most people who are still familiar with the term “animism” and hear it in the context of an exhibition, the word may bring to mind images of fetishes, totems, representations of a spirit-populated nature, tribal art, pre-modern rituals and savagery. These images have forever left their imprint on the term. The expectations they trigger, however, are not what this project concerns. *Animism* doesn’t exhibit or discuss artifacts or cultural practices considered animist. Instead, it uses the term and its baggage as an optical device, a mirror in which the particular way modernity conceptualizes, implements, and transgresses boundaries can come into view.

The exhibition, inspired by Latour, desires to examine animism in order to question whether modernity’s claims of having broken with the past are accurate. From the images in the catalog, all of which are intriguing, I believe it stages this inquiry as a strong contemporary art exhibition, with photographs, videos, installations, historical materials, wall texts, etc. The exhibition clearly doesn’t want to *be* animist, it only wishes to make use of the topic in order to ask extremely pertinent questions. (Questions I am clearly fascinated by.)

There is something ironic in using critique and questioning, the modern strategies par excellence, in order to undermine the assumptions of modernity. Latour is clear that there is no point in critiquing modernity – since modernity continually thrives on critique in order to re-invent itself, creating new hybrids and paradoxes in the process – and instead we must go somewhere else, find another way of looking at the world, another way of understanding our relation to the past. Strategies used by the *Animism* exhibition suggest there would be no way for an exhibition today to embody an animist worldview, such a thing could only take place if the viewers themselves were believers. However, it is also true that we simply don’t know, since no attempt is made to imagine what kind of exhibition might embody a spirit of animism today. In its refusal to struggle with the possibility that works of art do have a life of their own – in that we, at times, believe in them, and this belief can actually make us act, lead us do or think in ways we would have never otherwise considered – I suspect an opportunity is missed, a challenge that may well be taken up by some future project.

I wonder if the framework in which most contemporary art attempts to generate meaning is analogous to the 'never been modern' framework that Latour criticizes. Art is a world that separates, continuously playing the divisions against one another in ways that are often contradictory: good art against bad, art against everything else, political art against commerce, etc. The gallery is a place for art, but it is also a way of removing art from the rest of life. In my earlier analogy of the priest who has lost faith, I move back in time towards Christianity (a faith I have no personal experience with) but perhaps I don't go back far enough. I have not read nearly enough anthropology to know about previous cultures, previous ways of life, but following Latour's lead I would like to imagine an art, society and worldview that is considerably less divided. (Latour calls this position 'amodern'.) If nature is alive then it can, of course, speak to us. And if art is anything, it must have some life of its own, but a life far more integrated with our daily impulses and actions. These are ideals I have not taken even the smallest step towards. Nonetheless, I wonder about such matters constantly.

Richard Sennett writes: "Ritual's role in all human cultures is to relieve and resolve anxiety, by turning people outward in shared, symbolic acts; modern society has weakened those ritual ties. Secular rituals, particularly rituals whose point is co-operation itself, have proved too feeble to provide that support." Going to galleries and performances is a kind of ritual, as is making any kind of art. But they are weak rituals indeed, full of bad faith, ego and careerist intentions. Why can't we create works of art, and philosophies, that actually help us live our lives? Why does this question feel so naïve and ridiculous to me? From the beginning of time utopians of every stripe have been searching for a less divided world, and there is certainly no reason to stop searching today.