

Fear, Inequity and Time

A Sketch of How Art Answers the World's Questions

RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE

Recently, we were asked, in the course of an extended conversation, a three-legged question on how we responded to the calamities of our times as artists.¹ The question went something like this:

"How do you respond to:

- (i) fear of the other and aggression towards others,
- (ii) the inability of human beings to find the means to share the world's wealth and resources equitably,
- (iii) the arrogance of the modern individuated self's preoccupation with the present, and its impatience with other modes of inhabiting time?"

After an initial spell of exasperation at the somewhat mammoth scale of the problems posed by the question, we began to be intrigued by what we thought were the relationships between the keywords of its three constituent parts:

Fear. Inequity. Time.

We found this triangulation suggestive.

Fear/Aggression towards others – linked to an inability to share wealth and resources – embedded in a subject-object separation that erodes the possibility of cohabiting a simultaneity of diverse spatial and temporal anchors and flows. What follows is the sketch of an answer to this three-legged monster.

Let's take this step-by-step.

We feel that a key component without which none of the arms of this triangular tangle can hinge on to each other is a notion of scarcity. The anxiety of scarcity, the notion that in order not to have less we must have more, seems to us to be central in any understanding we seek of the present world.

The anxiety of scarcity produces a mania of measurement. We are constantly beset by acts of measuring quantities of how much things are in order to know by how much we fall short. The opposite of scarcity is plenitude (not, we might emphasise, abundance, which is merely a measure of relatively 'less' scarcity).

The feeling of plenitude, of knowing that the quantum of a thing does not necessarily exhaust all available aspects of our experience of it, is an attempt to come to terms with the idea of the uncountable. We could say that a possibly valid way of looking at today's world is to render it in terms of the tussle between obsessive measurement and the random but radical realisation of plenitude. This is a combat between numbers and the uncountable.

The disposition of fear/aggression towards others is not unrelated to an inability to conceive of resources except in proprietorial terms. Crucially, this views our experience of resources in terms of finitude, in terms of thinking that we will 'run out of them'. It also privileges the present – the time left before 'we run out', 'while stocks last' – as the time of the utmost importance. The times of the past and the possibility of the future are both mortgaged and held hostage to the urgency of the unyielding present.

The siege of the self by notions of property and exclusive usage only makes sense in a model where any attempt to open out the custodianship and usage of a resource will inevitably end in a hostile bid to dispossess one's claim to that said resource.

If you do not fear that others can only relate to you by taking away what you think is yours, or what nourishes or delights you, then, it does not make sense to cultivate and maintain a posture of aggression towards them.

If you are not forever 'present tense', you can enjoy reminiscence, you can play at scanning the unknown horizon of the future.

All these attitudes – of letting ourselves be open to the uncountable, to plenitude, to others not solely as hostile competitors, to a variegated sense of time – require us to consider the quality, rather than the quantity, of an experience.

Perhaps this is where art and artists come in, as people attuned to qualities. Not necessarily making their evaluations solely in terms of what can be 'counted' in or around an experience, process or object. It makes little sense to talk of a piece of music in terms of the 'number' of notes it had. Rather, our evaluation has to take into account the relationships between the notes, including the silences (the 'non-notes') that lie scattered through the piece. A sense of that relationship cannot be computed, even though music is probably the most mathematical of the arts. It has to be expressed in a non-quantitative language.

What we are left with, if we accept these bald facts, is the possibility that artists might repeatedly venture into the territory of imagination in order to point to forgotten, or as yet un-conceived, ways of thinking non-quantitatively about issues such as scarcity and value, about essence and identity and about our experience of dispersal and duration, about space and time.

What has art got to do with this?

Simple.

Art enables us to ask questions about life afresh. Today, this possibility exists alongside the very real fear of an accelerated drift into genocidal wars and lethal acts of random violence. The renewed importance of asking fundamental questions about what life is or what it might offer is offset against the danger of life's extinction. That is why insisting on making art and making room for art is more than about affect, ideas and sensation alone, it is a way of guaranteeing a space for life.

And yet, in the end, artists are free not to be useful, this is a freedom that needs to be taken seriously. This freedom from utility makes it possible to enter realms of pure conjecture, or of looking at reality freed from the constraints of the real and the extant. By no means should this freedom be bargained away. We think that this freedom needs to be understood as a kind of uncountable plenitude.

In this freedom lies the constantly renewable possibility of positing different modes of relationships between selves and others, between the relative significance of different ways of sharing things, and different attitudes to space and time.

We need more than a mere measure of things as the building blocks of universal language. The vocabulary of measurement attempts to say way too much by means of way too little. We need more than just the sayable and the unsayable.

We need to ask: What are the signs of life? What kinds of visions can make us see signs of life? What remains to be brought out from our quagmires?

Not a bad set of challenges.