

Hope in Groundlessness: Art's Denial as Pedagogy

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Abstract:

Education's ill-fated toing and froing between 'progressive' and 'conservative' ideologies has precluded the possibility of groundlessness from our ways of thinking, doing and making. Yet it is by force of the contingent language of groundlessness and its usage of trope, paradox and aporia that contemporary art re-articulates human thinking beyond a boxed idea of reason. The main tenor of this essay is to argue and suggest that the quandary of the contingent self is no excuse for the restoration of a ground in art and education. It is through the notion of groundlessness that one seeks hope. Equally it is because of the idea of groundlessness that our ethical responsibilities cannot ignore the primacy of individual Choice. The pedagogy of art's refusal emerges against such backdrop. This essay is partly offered as a dialogue on art and education by drawing some attention to the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Vattimo; as well as the art of Francis Bacon, Marino Marini, Kiki Smith and Frank Auerbach.

He who refuses does not repent. Asked again,
he would still say no. Yet that no – the right no –
undermines him all his life.
Constantine P. Cavafy, 'Che fece ... il gran rifiuto' (1992, p. 12)¹

¹ *Che fece ... il gran rifiuto* literally means [he] who performed ... the great denial. Cavafy takes the phrase *il gran rifiuto* from Dante's *Inferno* Book III, stanza 59: *vidi e conobbi l'ombra di colui | che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto* (I saw and recognized the shadow of he | who performed with insolence the great denial). It is not clear who Dante is referring to. Some specialists attribute this illusive person to a number of biblical figures who denied, in their different ways, God's demand.

By denying itself as *ground*, contemporary art renders irrelevant the unitary assumption for truth, beauty and goodness. Unless education is to be limited to social construction, the legitimacy of art in education must start from the recognition of this denial.² Art's great denial, its *gran rifiuto*, is neither metaphysical nor political. Rather, it is an exchange between those who take to art's stage where it is presented and discussed, made and 'learnt'. In contemporary art, everyone — from artist, to art form, to performer, to the audience — exchanges roles in response to art's historical alterity. Because art's act is historical, it survives the perpetual 'death' of history and remains transient. The transient nature of art's historical stage also confirms that the Romantic, Liberal and Egalitarian ideals, by which art has been regarded and accessed by individuals and society, have long been concluded. Art belongs to no one: even when individuals pay millions to 'own' works of art.

In view — and perhaps *because* — of Modernism, we know that without its great denial, art cannot occasion its learners into knowing the ways of Error. After Kierkegaard it will be argued (cf. §3, below) that without Error, education would be devoid of *truth*. Likewise, it could be inferred that the source of Error in art and education partakes of the historical contingency by which we recognise and declare art as 'useless'. In such recognition, art and education stand beyond those forms of commodification and collectivisation by which the Enlightenment assumed human reason (and with it, the individual) as an object of certainty, and thereby as an object devoid of Error. The contemporary arts have unfailingly confirmed that without the occasion for Error there is no learning and no art. Through art and education human beings come to recognise their historical contingency.

Agnes Heller (1993, p. 8) reminds us that historical contingency is here to stay: "one cannot get rid of it by neatly gluing together pastiches of old teleological images and world visions".³ Heller also tells us that we have "only practical ways to divest historical-social contingency". Amongst other she argues for "returning to one of the pre-modern social arrangements" or perhaps better still, to resort to "inventing new ones which transcend the present state of the world" (ibid.). Historical contingency also implies the rejection of the myths of inevitable progress and universal necessity. Upon valuing art and education from the condition of contingency, we as human

Cavafy's points of reference are equally arcane. Some relate *il gran rifiuto* to Cavafy's homosexuality and the prejudices of Alexandrian society. Others view this as a symptom of Cavafy's struggle with the dilemma of the private and public spheres. For a comprehensive reading of Cavafy's poetry in relationship with his private and public persona cf. Keeley 1996.

² As agents of social construction art and education are tied to the assumption of a ground where they are valued *relatively* and according to what they are deemed to 'construct' by way of their being a part of a social edifice. As social constructors, art and education are not autonomous and intrinsically tied to assumed teleological scaffolding. As social constructors, art and education are in turn constructed by the same edifice they inform — which is where the argument for social construction in both its relativist and positivist antipodes, leads to tautology.

³ In *A Philosophy of History. In Fragments*, Heller presents us with two forms of contingency and thereby two forms of contingency-consciousness by which we view the world and ourselves: cosmic contingency and historical contingency. She explains that "cosmic contingency consciousness can be overruled in post-modernity, but the consciousness of historical-social contingency cannot. Historical-social contingency is not a 'thing-in-itself'. The veracity of the assertion 'we are contingent beings' in the latter understanding depends on our interpretation or perception only as statements of fact in general. Historical-social contingency cannot be annulled by thinking, imagination, perception, interpretation, or by any thought act or speech act in speculation." Cf. Heller 1993, pp. 8ff.

beings seek to belie the notion of the *ground* as a source of certainty. By means of art and education we also hope to denounce certainty and clarity as sources of commodification and collectivisation, which with hindsight, we can view as Modernity's confirmation of historical contingency.

Historical contingency is the human condition of modernity. There is no wager for or against this contingency, since there is no ignorance about it. Modern men and women are aware of their contingency, even if they are entirely unfamiliar with the concept, for they experience it. Modern thinking summarizes this experience, makes it manifest, reinforces it, reflects upon it (Heller 1993, p. 16).

The main tenor of this essay is to argue and suggest — sometimes playfully, sometimes ironically, but never without seriousness — that the quandary of the contingent self as bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment, and as reinforced by Modernity's historical-contingency consciousness, is no excuse for the restoration of a ground for certainty in art or education. The ill-fated histories of 'progressive' and 'traditional' forms of teaching and learning — not to mention the artificial *struggle* between these camps — teach us that the notion of a model in education, whether 'open' or 'closed', remains equally interested and tied to the narratives by which the School has been de-historicised. By being de-historicised, the School has been preserved on a false certainty where knowledge remained, to use a phrase that is feminist in origin, 'de-genred'.⁴ As a consequence of a de-genred position, both the open and closed schools of educational thinking have precluded the possibility of *groundlessness* from the ways of reasoning learning and knowledge. This is because in failing to recognise its historicity, the School failed to be recognised in its contingency, and was thereby assumed as a perennial ground on which the only permitted *genred* forms of knowledge were limited to a curricular system that precluded the playfulness of knowledge, especially with regards to the arts (see also Baldacchino 1994).

Yet it is by force of the contingent language of groundlessness and its usage of trope, paradox and aporia that contemporary art seeks and continues to re-articulate human thinking beyond a boxed idea of human reason. It is also through the notion of groundlessness that one seeks a notion of hope that would supersede the dialectical cycles of subject-object, universal-particular, mind-body, spirit-matter ... This is where we also demand that we seek hope in other than cosmic universality. One way of reading hope within *groundlessness* is to ascertain the truth, and thereby cope with it from within the 'things' — *les choses* or the *pragmata* — that inform our daily lives. Here one must recognise the longstanding philosophical debates over hope and contingency, as well as the equally potent arguments that come to us from within the pragmatist and liberal traditions.⁵ Likewise, the critical discourse by which Agnes

⁴ In French, *genre* means both 'gender' and 'genre' as used in English. In this incremented meaning of 'gender' as inclusive of 'genre' we could dwell on how education has remained intentionally de-genred — and thereby also de-gendered, as well as de-sexed, de-bodied, de-historicised ... etc. For a fascinating discussion of the inter-relation between *genre* and *gender* in the discourses of feminism and related theories cf. Paola DiCori's essay *Genere e/o gender? Controversie storiche e teorie femministe* in Bellagamba, Di Cori, Pustianaz (2000), pp. 17ff.

⁵ Here I draw to the reader's attention Richard Rorty's take on the idea of hope in contingency — with which he engages the concept of irony. Rorty's notion of hope is qualified as 'liberal hope' and to this effect it would take a couple of essays to discuss — something which this essay does not afford due to

Heller nurtures hope, is an approach that I would propose as a foundation for a further study of the relationship between art, education and historical contingency:

As long as one shares this world and not another, one cannot remain an authentic person unless one faces one's own historical contingency and learns to live with it, to cope with it and to withstand the strong temptation to escape from it (Heller 1993, p. 8).

1. Playful quandaries

In his *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard returns to a Socratic, and thereby ironic, dialogue and proposes a take on reality that *prima facie* may appear as totally irrelevant to the question of historical contingency. He concludes his *Fragments* with the following 'Moral':

The projected hypothesis indisputably makes an advance upon Socrates, which is apparent at every point. Whether it is therefore more true than the Socratic doctrine is an entirely different question, which cannot be decided in the same breadth, since we have here assumed a new organ: Faith; a new presupposition: the consciousness of Sin; a new decision: the Moment; and new Teacher: the God in Time. Without these I certainly never would have dared present myself for inspection before the master of Irony (...) whom I approach with a palpitating enthusiasm that yields to none (Kierkegaard 1974, p. 139).

At best masked and at most indirect, Kierkegaard's critical aim goes straight towards a dialectical logic as it stands foreclosed by the Hegelian System. Roger Poole (1993) 'unpacks' Kierkegaard's statement and explains that Kierkegaard's 'Moral' "names the incommensurable elements that he has built into his imaginary dialogue with Socrates". Poole argues that "[e]ach and every one of these elements is directly provocative to the Hegelian System. They are all unassimilable, they remain outside the System, and they cannot be absorbed into any triad" (p. 99).

As *Johannes Climacus*, Kierkegaard dialogues with Socrates in jocular and open fashion. From the opening pages of his *Philosophical Fragments* he tells us how, "[f]rom the standpoint of the Socratic thought every point of departure in time is *eo ipso* accidental, an occasion, a vanishing moment. The teacher himself is no more than this; and if he offers himself and his instruction on an other basis, he does not give but takes away, and is not even the other's friend, much less his teacher" (Kierkegaard 1974, p.13).

limitations of space. For the reader to get a context of Rorty's notion of liberal hope see his celebrated *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, especially his chapter 'Private Irony and Liberal Hope', and in particular a passage towards the end of page 94 where he makes an argument for solidarity as something that "has to be constructed out of little pieces, rather than found already waiting, in the form of an ur-language which all of us recognize when we hear it". While *prima facie* one would concur with Rorty, the context of a liberal hope needs to be qualified in terms of what it means historically — especially in view of the historical grounds by which the liberal assumption of experience and pragmatism has been left open to the foreclosure of the kind of solidarity that Rorty so rightly and laudably invokes. Cf. Rorty, 1990.

Kierkegaard's critique of the foreclosed dialectic of a mediated individuality prefigures what we now could identify as contemporary art and culture's problematic relationship with the notion of a unitary self that is at peace with the true, the beautiful and the good. While Modernists were caught between a mediated individuality and the necessary counter-assertion of the unmediated self, this remained suspended between two directions: one against the fragmentation of the self, and hence favouring a *mediated* self; the other resulting in the suppression of particularity as waged by the myth of a universalized truth that resulted in myriad individualised quandaries.

Kierkegaard's work had already anticipated how huge a task would be left upon us, artists, teachers and philosophers of the 21st century, to disentangle the mess bequeathed by the failed utopias of Modernity. He anticipates how the issue of the self is trapped in a quandary that is mainly caused by the Self's overwhelming presence. While the emancipated notion of the Self has been secured by philosophical arguments such as existentialism and phenomenology, we are now faced with the challenge to reroute the centrality of the Self into the realities of what is now recognized by the heirs of existentialism and phenomenology as the alienation of the aesthetic (cf. Bernstein 1993). This state of affairs has been partly brought up by the fact that Modernism, as the true offspring of the Enlightenment, could not avoid the *Aufhebung* — the *sublation* — of the actual. Modernism's main struggle was intent on gaining ground for an individuality that should have resisted the triadic assumptions of a dialectic that was trapped within a cycle of syntheses. In confronting this entrapment, Modernism protagonized individuality as a notion that ultimately mediated what in effect it was meant to resist. Thus utopia became a nightmare: where the polity of reason found itself siphoning the vacuum of a failed liberalism into the smoke of the death machines in Auschwitz; and where positivism 'justified' social emancipation by the horrors of the Gulags and the suppression of freedom and equality (cf. Adorno 1990 and Rose 1992).

Beyond Modernity's confused battlegrounds, Kierkegaard presents the philosophical imaginary with a new 'organ' (faith); a new 'presupposition' (the consciousness of sin); and a new 'decision' (the moment). Last but not least, and via his re-presentation of Socrates, Kierkegaard presents 'a new teacher', whom he identified with '*the god in time*'. This is a *defined* god, placed within a context (that of time) and distanced from '*a god*' as an undefined essence. One cannot help but notice that this defined god greets us with the playfulness by which Kierkegaard will later say that "God does not exist, he is eternal" (Kong 1974, p. xiii). Here one is also reminded of Nietzsche's equal playfulness by which he urges the struggle for the self beyond its customary duty to seek to 'know' itself: "Active, successful natures act, not according to the dictum 'know thyself', but as if there hovered before them the commandment: *will a self and thou shalt become a self.*" (*Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, §366, in Nietzsche 1980a, p. 232).

2. Dismantling the ground

The dismantling of a *ground* for learning, and the proposal of a groundlessness that ultimately gives hope, springs from the philosophical dilemmas which, in the last four to five decades, have come forward in reaction to the problems of Modernity. With the ground as a disputable premise, the scenario of a *groundless* practice (as we often infer from contemporary arts and literature) adds anxiety to any engagement with

education. If anything, in education we all entertain the feeling of 'hope'. Indeed, if this hope is uttered at the same time its presumed ground is deemed redundant, then we are confronted by a very peculiar state of affairs.

Here one must clarify how — or indeed *whether* — an invocation of approaches and situations (*ours* as educationists, *ours* in view of philosophy and its practitioners, and *ours* in view of art and its practitioners), also carries a *sequence* by which a pattern of intentions would take place. By 'sequence' I mean the points, the beginnings/origins and end/objectives, by which we can confirm that our patterns of intentions are conducive to the patterns of expression that make our *hopeful* case for art, philosophy or education.

This is where we are also told that we cannot have it both ways. Once we identify a quandary it is either resolved on the grounds of choosing between one argument over the other, or it is suspended.⁶ In the case of suspending the contradiction (without necessarily solving or synthesizing its parts) the interests that could have an effect on one side or another are taken out of the equation.

It is arguable to say that the absence of a *ground* by which could have re-traced the interestedness of late Modernity, comes to our attention when we realise that ultimately all we have are interpretations.⁷ These interpretations have traditionally emerged from the interested grounds that constructed a multiplicity of contexts intended to perpetuate the foreclosed syntheses of an equally *interested* dialectical system. Because the terms of reference for such systems constitute a form of interested surrogacy, our task as educators, artists and philosophers remains intent on finding a way out of the quandary. However, this task maintains a double bind: this time, the quandary stays as a form of reasoning, and therefore it should not be eliminated from the equation.

The idea of a clear and distinct form of reasoning which eliminates any paradox or quandary is impossible. This impossibility is not caused by some metaphysical turn of events, but has specific roots in the historicity by which human reason has evolved on

⁶ By 'suspended' I the method of *epoché* which Husserl describes as a 'bracketing' and a 'suspension' as follows: "A consistent epoché of the phenomenologist is required, if he wishes to break through to his own consciousness as pure phenomenon or as the totality of his purely mental processes. That is to say, in the accomplishment of phenomenological reflection he must inhibit every co-accomplishment of objective positing produced in unreflective consciousness, and therewith [inhibit] every judgmental drawing-in of the world as it 'exists' for him straightforwardly. The specific experience of this house, this body, of a world as such, is and remains, however, according to its own essential content and thus inseparably, experience 'of this house', this body, this world; this is so for every mode of consciousness which is directed towards an object. It is, after all, quite impossible to describe an intentional experience — even if illusory, an invalid judgment, or the like — without at the same time describing the object of that consciousness *as such*. The universal epoché of the world as it becomes known in consciousness (the 'putting it in brackets') shuts out from the phenomenological field the world as it exists for the subject in simple absoluteness; its place, however, is taken by the world as given in *consciousness* (perceived, remembered, judged, thought, valued, etc.) — the world as such, the 'world in brackets', or in other words, the world, or rather individual things in the world as absolute, are replaced by the respective meaning of each in *consciousness* in its various modes (perceptual meaning, recollected meaning, and so on)." Cf. Husserl 1971, pp. 77-90.

⁷ I would also refer to Gianni Vattimo's *koiné* between hermeneutics and nihilism in his *Oltre l'Interpretazione* (cf. Vattimo 1995a). For my reading of Vattimo vis-à-vis the relationship between illusion and reality in art and how this is read in view of the absence of a ground and within the context of a 'weak' reality see also Baldacchino 2005.

the grounds of its interest, and has thereby been forced to face its own contingency (as we have argued above). As Vattimo argues in his essay ‘La verità dell’ermeneutica’ “after Nietzsche it seems impossible to continue to think of the clear and distinct idea as a model of truth and of the experience of the true as an inconvertible certainty of consciousness confronted by a content which is given as self-evident” (Vattimo 1995b, pp. 110-111).

This also flies in the face of the simplistic assumption that is made about Modern reason. The assumption is often crystallized by the figure of Descartes who, we are told, has eliminated doubt once and for all by assuming that the only ground for reason was a clear and distinct foundation for truth. In like fashion education shuns reason from the necessary dilemmas by which learning is made possible in the first place. Yet any educator will confirm that if the moment of doubt is shunned forever, then reason will just be one moment, one occasion that will never create any more doubt — and therefore will foreclose any more possibilities for reason to evolve in its ensuing truth. It is in this certainty of truth and positive learning — grounded as it were in the necessity of clarity and factuality — that the self is also pushed further away from us by an educational reasoning that hopelessly tries to reinforce the idea of a ground, even when it claims to be open to practices and methods of play, experimentation and other routes by which, ultimately, the learner seeks to conform with the rest of the world (!).

3. Occasioning the Error

Kierkegaard bypasses the Cartesian question of certainty by recognising a fundamental relationship between Error and the self; where knowledge cannot be realised without the self’s *passage* through Error: “For my own Error is something I can discover only by myself, since it is only when I have discovered it that it is discovered, even if the whole world knew of it before” (Kierkegaard 1974 p. 17).

Ultimately the occasion for Error defies forgetfulness. Yet by becoming aware of our forgetfulness — which is the first step of the learning process — we come to terms with a contingent state by which Truth is made manifest in a form of recollection that confirms metaphysical certainty as a gamble between a fixed assumption of knowledge and the ironic and jocular ways by which learners defy epistemological fixedness. So when, in the previous Section (§2) I make mention of a ‘pattern of intention’ by which we arrive at an expression of how art, philosophy and education are engaged, I know that I may be giving a wrong impression. Given the quandary of groundlessness by which we here read art, education and philosophy, we can appreciate how Kierkegaard disturbs the conventions of sequence. This is done when, not without irony, Kierkegaard tells us how Socrates proclaims the teacher as an ‘occasion’ in a pattern that does not give way to a form of learning something from scratch, but where learning is *anamnesis* — a recollection — by which truth is gained at the moment of Error.

If the Teacher serves as an occasion by means of which the learner is reminded, he cannot help the learner to recall that he really knows the Truth; for the learner is in a state of Error. What the Teacher can give him occasion to remember is, that he is in Error. But in this

consciousness the learner is excluded from the Truth even more decisively than before, when he lived in ignorance of his Error. In this manner the teacher thrusts the learner away from him, precisely by serving as a reminder; only that the learner, in thus being thrust back upon himself, does not discover that he know the Truth already, but discovers his Error; with respect to which act of consciousness the Socratic principle holds, that the teacher is merely an occasion whoever he may be, even if he is a God (Kierkegaard 1974, p. 17).

Here I want to suggest that we assume *sequence* as a convenient way by which we constantly set out a number of questions about art and education. The sequence is interested — i.e. it is bound by a number of conditions that may or may not be freely assumed by art and education. Like the teacher there is a point when art thrusts its learners away. Here the learners are not only those who learn art, but more intently the practitioners of art. Art's practitioners are not simply those who make art in the studio, but also those who elect to remake art *within* and *as* the audience in Museums, Galleries, Churches, Public or Private spaces, Schools ... anywhere and everywhere art appears.

In this state of affairs the source of art's truth emerges in the Error by which the makers of art are told that their work of art will ultimately *deny* them. This is what we have identified in this essay as art's *great denial*. Here we have a scenario where both art's makers and its audience come to realise that for art to be art it needs to *deny* them. This is also where our attention needs to shift from education to art. The main reason for this shift is that art — unlike education — allows us to freely remove, change and exchange the *ground* from our conversation. This removal, denial, refusal — call it what you want — is complemented by a further refusal of it ever being returned to 'us'. Here, to borrow another term from Kierkegaard, we experience an astounding feeling where we come to witness an occasion for *Offence*⁸

4. Learning art's denial

The passage from Error to Self is neither conclusive nor an *a priori* principle. The passage could feed on itself by dint of its reflexive needs, with the result of it losing the possibility of further engagements with Error. The scenario of the teacher shunting the learner and thereby the learner realizing the Error, brings us back to the peculiarity identified earlier in this essay (cf. §2, above), where the ground for Error is rooted in the paradox, or quandary, by which a hope for learning must be sought in groundlessness. In groundlessness there is no place for learning as a 'secure' form. Yet at the same time one could not forget that it is only in groundlessness that art and education find a hope of upholding their paradoxical relationship especially when what is at stake is men and women's right to their individuality.

While I would not like to enter this essay into a further — much more expansive — discussion of what is individuality, one must bear in mind that contemporary art is

⁸ For lack of space, and to avoid being tangential, I chose not to elaborate further on how this notion of withdrawal could be related to Kierkegaard's discussion of the relationship between Reason and Paradox, as 'mediated' by the notion of the offended consciousness. Cf. Kierkegaard's 'Appendix: the Paradox and the Offended Consciousness (An Acoustic Illusion)', in Kierkegaard 1974, pp. 60ff.

borne out of the Modernity's historical struggle to reassert art's autonomy. To this end, I suggest that we take a quick look at Francis Bacon's discussion with David Sylvester about the issue of conveyance in art. By conveyance here we do not mean simply how one conveys a message in art. Art is not a purveyor of messages. Neither is it some instrument for something else — which is where art's autonomy is by itself an *essence* and not a form *for* an essence. Another way of saying this is that the content of art is art, and not something that takes art's form to be conveyed by art.⁹

In response to Sylvester's question "why is it you want to avoid telling a story?", Bacon responds: "I don't want to avoid telling a story, but I want very, very much to do the thing that Valéry said — to give the sensation without the boredom of its conveyance (Bacon & Sylvester 1995, p. 65). More specifically, when he talks about the act of painting, in the sense of the mundane spreading of paint over the canvas, Bacon makes an argument for art's specificity (as opposed to art's conveyance of something else) with a question:

Can you analyze the difference, in fact, between paint which conveys directly and paint which conveys through illustration? This is a very, very difficult problem to put into words. It is something to do with instinct. It's a very, very close and difficult thing to know why some paint comes across directly onto the nervous system and other paint tells you the story in a long diatribe through the brain. (Bacon & Sylvester 1995, p. 18)

Elsewhere, I have argued that art's conveyance is recorded by the 'instinct' of accident. The artist follows this instinct consciously through the marks that are carried as paint. It is also as paint that these marks impose themselves as an ordering of the imaged reference that retains their distinction from the illustrative (Baldacchino 1998, p. 127). The imaged reference is not simply a message that 'serves' as art's content. Rather the imaged reference is an integral part of the mark-making by which the accident is consciously transformed into the notion of contingency. In this way contingency is reasoned on its own terms — which goes contrary to the rationalisation of contingency.

With hindsight and in view of the argument presented in this essay, one could add that the 'instinct' of accident has a lot to do with the idea of Error in the process of recollection. In contemporary art Error is articulated as a mark, as a moment of art's reasoning out 'forgetfulness' as knowledge. This notion of anamnesis is quite different from Plato's doctrine. While we can never argue that anamnesis holds value to contemporary theories of learning, one cannot simply dismiss Plato's doctrine of anamnesis as some kind of primitive theory of human development limited to the doctrine of reincarnation. The notion of anamnesis could offer a conceptual framework that comes to us via contemporary art as a recognition of memory, especially in how this concept of memory is tied to that of contingency-consciousness. This concept of memory needs to be attached to the historicity by which we become conscious of our contingency — especially when this is figured in the arts. Within the

⁹ This is very different from saying that art is there for art's sake. In its autonomy art is not at the service of anyone or anything — even when this someone or something may appear as the artist or the art-form. As Lyotard (1989, p. 239) remarks to the question, "Art for art's sake?": "No, there's no *for*, because there is no finality, and no fulfillment. Merely the prodigious power of presentations".

‘remit’ of the arts, anamnesis is a jocular concept by which we navigate our concept of time. Our navigation has nothing to do with a recollection of the past — or even a pre-corporeal past (as Plato would suggest). To make sense of the contingency of the present, anamnesis must be figured as the *resumption* of a future from the memorial *fragments* of the past. So there is no need to fix a ground for anamnesis as a concept within the remits of contemporary art. Any ground for anamnesis is eliminated by the fact that in this occasion for learning there is no need to construct or conform with any specific epistemological horizon.

5. Ethical Choices

After Bacon, contemporary art brings us closer to the related question of the contingent self. This becomes evident in prominent works of contemporary art such as Kiki Smith’s, where the notion of *ground* is substituted by the idea of a *site*. In Smith’s performance-related works we are confronted by the self in its contingency, where we have no choice but to engage with the body as a site of willed fragmentation. While the body is willed by individual choice as *its own* site of knowledge, the self freely rediscovers memory by means of the body, as a *memory-made-body*. In this negotiation between one’s found contingency and one’s willed rediscovery, the self is in turn signified by its quandaries. In other words, the self achieves contingency-consciousness by means of its corporeal choices.

In *Las Animas* (1997) Kiki Smith takes on the body of the artist as the site of our own memories. I hasten to add that that is but one reading and it is a reading that I make by the choice that the work — Smith’s — gives me as a member of its audience. *My* reading may indeed be nothing like someone else’s (including the artist’s), but this does not diminish the art-form’s autonomy. What matters is that the work of art — as originated by Smith — is now open to what I could take from it for myself by means of the choices that this work has allowed me to make.¹⁰

The relationship between art and the body also plays an interesting role in how contemporary portraiture transgresses the sitter’s bodies. Here I cite the example of the Italian sculptor Marino Marini who reflects on how his art confronts his sitter:

This truth has to survive in me till the completion of the portraiture. The result has to satisfy me with regards the vitality of expression and the actualization of the individual’s true lines of character. Once this assignment is exhausted, and *the subject is consigned to the kingdom of the dead who are still alive*, I hand my work to the client ... (Marini, cited in Busignani 1968, p. 22, my emphasis).

Marini confronts someone else’s body and takes it to the limits of absolute refusal. What he refuses to the body is not its life but an art-form that merely acts as a vehicle of the sitter’s self. The art-form actually takes over the body of the sitter and refuses to give it comfort. The sitter’s self is “consigned to the kingdom of the dead” because while the sitter is alive, the art-form takes a new, other, life of its own. This life assumes its own right to be Other; an autonomous life that only affords the memory of

¹⁰ A crucial point is made by Eco (1995) when he presents the notion of ‘openness’ in a work of art, particularly in late Modernity and ‘after’ — cf. his seminal and celebrated *Opera Aperta*.

the sitter. This is where the art-form becomes *pedagogical* in terms of its ability to act as a catalyst of anamnesis. The art-form is not pedagogical because it tells us a story about the sitter. The art-form allows us to remember the sitter, but only as a memory that is fragmented, as a figuration of contingency. This is another way of defining art's denial.

Another example of this relationship between artist and sitter is that of the British painter Frank Auerbach who, when asked by John Tusa "Why do you like having this group of people — many of whom sat for you for ten, fifteen, twenty years? Why do you need this to produce your portraits?" he replies:

Well, some of it is patent in what I've already said: I don't think many people would put up with it. But there's also, I think, a factor on both sides of self-forgetfulness. If they've sat long enough, they're not self-conscious as a sitter. And they become used to my behaviour, and as they become used to me, I can behave freely without constraints of wondering whether I'm shocking them or anything of that sort! And then it never seems to end for me. (Auerbach in Tusa 2004, p. 45).

In the long process of his portraiture Auerbach is known to go on the same panel for several times through weeks and weeks of scraping off the paint which he had put on during the previous sitting. Sometimes he scrapes off the paint at the end of the sitting — leaving bare marks on the panel, as a sort of memory on which he then scores and then builds upon other encounters with his sitter — only to be scored and scraped off again. In the same interview Tusa asks Auerbach whether destruction is one aspect of his creative process. Auerbach is unequivocal:

I think it absolutely is. I think it absolutely is. Yeats said: 'Destroy your darlings'. If one begins to cherish and like what one's done, one's actually on a very slippery slope indeed, selling oneself one's own paintings, and there's nothing to do. One's got to heed one's conscience. And if one feels a slight unease, even if the thing seems plausible and presentable and nobody else might notice that it's no good, one's got to destroy it (Tusa 2004, p. 46).

The issue of memory here becomes a layered process where anamnesis is pluralised, so to speak. The fragmentation of the sitter is not as central to Auerbach as the remaking — in a constant *return* — of the sitter as an occasion for the artist to seek what he is not sure about. What the artist seeks is a memory that works in reverse — it is a memory in the future; a paradoxical assumption because it is not there as yet, and therefore it is a memory besieged by the limitations of its inconclusive meaning. The figure of the sitter is an occasion for this paradox; but it is only a moment that keeps recurring and comes back week after week for years and years. Auerbach is surely using the sameness of a sitter — who gets old and transforms herself — so that he conveys difference in the fashion of an eternal return.

Kiki Smith's work does a similar thing, but in this case the anamnesis of the figure is left to another contingent state of affairs — our participation with the work. Smith's *Las Animas*, like her *Selfportrait* (1996), is performative and photographic. In *Las Animas* the figure is taken into a variety of positions by which the corporeal parts

become autonomous from the whole. In *Selfportrait*, the figure becomes a work of art by its engagement with the material that shrouds the real life body — Smith's. In these works, the aesthetic's alienation from truth and goodness is not simply a sentence or a philosophical mantra. In these works Smith transforms the body into a site that refutes any hope for serene memories. We are not confronted by violence as such, but by a violent irony that verges on satirizing the body as a totality. By this we are invited to learn about the different parts of the body on a set of terms of reference by which fragmentation is the medium of the body's performance.

The pedagogy of art, as that form of learning that is borne out of art's autonomy, turns on the centrality of choice. It is with choice that we need to assume a way of living with truth beauty and goodness — but this time not relying on a unitary ground. It is also by means of our faculties to learn via contingency consciousness that we assume responsibility to learn the craft of human choice. Here I recall Thomas Nagel's *The Last Word*:

Morality is possible only for beings capable of seeing themselves as one individual among others more or less similar in general respects — capable, in other words, of seeing themselves as others see them. When we recognize that although we occupy only our own point of view and not that of anyone else, there is nothing cosmically unique about it, *we are faced with a choice*. This choice has to do with the relation between the value we naturally accord to ourselves and our fates from our point of view, and the attitude we take toward these same things when viewed from the impersonal standpoint that assigns to us no unique status apart from anyone else. (Nagel 1997, pp.120-1, my emphasis)

Whether our ethical choices (as forwarded by Nagel) about our individuality are co-terminate with art's individuality is something that has to be ascertained in a further essay. However the moral context highlighted by Nagel holds relevance to the reason for art's denial — in the sense that such denial is tied to an individual choice that, in the arts, finds expression by means of the autonomy of the art-form. As we read in another of Cavafy's poems, *Windows*:

Perhaps the light will prove another tyranny.
Who knows what new things it will expose? (Cavafy 1992, p.14)

* * *

Any curriculum or system of education that does not recognise the quandaries brought up by our historical contingency, will remain trapped in a self-indulgent tautology that tries to deny contingency by investing in a false optimism that adds nothing to art or education.

If, as this essay argues, the metaphysical sources of a clear and distinct certainty foreclose the realisation of Error as a pedagogical occasion, then there are serious implications with regards to what is assumed as ethical when the moment of truth in art and education is to be sought outside a remit of what was deemed to be a unitary horizon. Likewise, by the premises of groundlessness, the moment of truth must be borne out from doubt and error. This is done in pursuit of that array of possibilities

which are not simply bound to education or art, but which art and education allow us to choose. More importantly, these possibilities allow us to take on a position against what Nietzsche describes as the self-conceit of the *moral person*: “When I visited men, I found them sitting upon an old self-conceit. Each one thought he had long since known what was good and evil for man” (Nietzsche 1980b §III: *Of Old and New Law Tables* 2).

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