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3 *Labour, work and action in the creative process*

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In this chapter I argue that our coming to terms with the organisation of and any subsequent capitalising on ‘creative’¹ activity today, will need to reckon with – but not decide between – differing and conflicting accounts of what brings about these so-called ‘created’ objects. The narrative accounts that are given pertaining to the origin of a created object, and the claims that are wrapped inside those accounts, I will refer to as ‘genetic stories’. In summary, such accounts can be analysed into one of three categories: the story of *labour*, *work* or *action*. *Laborious* production will emphasise effort, toil, ‘perspiration’; *workly* production will emphasise planning, craft, technique and execution; *actional* production will emphasise spontaneity, decisiveness and risk. Descriptions of formation and origination can be used to bestow upon an artefact a meaning and a value, the genetic story told of the work, be it laborious, workly or actional, inclines our opinion of it significantly. We suppose we *know* something essential of an artefact when we know (or think we know) from whence it came. Hence, we are liable to take an interest in what apparently took place ‘behind the scenes’ of a specific ‘creative’ act; we might have an interest in what we know, or imagine, to have precipitated or influenced the ultimate form and expressive contours of a composition. Letters, diaries, anecdotes, interviews and sketches hold the promise of relaying something of the forces that shape the complex circumstances and contingencies of production.

Indirectly, my arguments in this essay are designed to thwart the temptation to presume that artistic production as a whole cannot be intellectualised without in the same moment corrupting its essence. In no sense need one pass over the creative process in silence. I wish to show that the stubborn paradoxes and strategic silences that are seemingly borne of our attempts to think or describe creative processes, arise not from deep mysteries latent within the imagination, or from influences inaccessible within the souls of artists, but, more

prosaically, from the proximity of irreconcilable hypotheses regarding the origins of objects. Like the paradoxes of Zeno, which are thought experiments turned merely to lure and entertain our guileless wits and are not, as they at first appear, windows onto an abyss of impossibility and irrationality, the paradoxes of creativity are relatively benign, arising more from our initial misapprehensions, hastily formed conclusions and culturally reinforced ideologies than from dark regimes of madness, inspiration and temperament. So, despite apparently bullet-proof arguments to the contrary, Achilles will catch the tortoise, and notwithstanding the blustering mood swings, the black silences, frustrations and uncertainties; notwithstanding bursts of creative excitement, the vertigo of endless possibility, that artists are often prone to, works of art can be made in an orderly, rational and manageable manner. And they are none the worse for that.

In taking this critical approach one rails against some powerful interests within the institution of art. By trafficking allure, mystery and perplexity surrounding the processes that produce artworks (carried over in the endless task of interpreting and revering the 'classics'), art stands to profit significantly: mystery produces the endurance of our fascination with its aesthetic objects; they endure through being remade in wonder. One might suppose that an unparadoxical art is not really art at all, but rather some routine, soulless, machine production. While this essay is clearly committed to the cause of aesthetic disenchantment, it does not thereby advocate the vulgarisation of art. Quite the contrary: there is indeed something incalculable, troubling and perplexing, in the midst of the creative process, but my conclusion will be that 'something' is perfectly rational. That something has a name: *the decision*.

The categories of labour, work and action I have adapted from Hannah Arendt's book, *The Human Condition* (1958). In outline, the concept of labour is characterised by circularity: the tasks faced by labour are (or seem) endless because they begin again as soon as they are over. Housework amounts to labour, as does gardening, correspondence, cooking, administration; it is always there, demanding our time and attention. Work, however, presents us with tasks which once complete, are complete forever. Completion closes the task and what we have done has a robustness and a permanence which is, or can be, a satisfaction to us. We can take up our finished work and feel proud of our achievement. If I execute a plan or build an object from a

model, then I work. If I externalise a conception, and bring something into being, then I work. Work, rather than being circular, is directed towards some goal. Such objects as work produces are likely to have a use and, importantly, they are likely to possess the durability that they need to become property. As useful, identifiable, durable things, they can enter into the market place, they can be exchanged, as well as be added to the other forms of capital. No object is absolutely durable – use destroys durability – but the worked, artificial object endures to a great degree, and serves an important function in stabilising human life. The homes we return to, the objects that populate that home, all momentarily suspend the remorseless transitoriness of life. Objects protect us from the vagaries of nature, we construct a world within the world, a world that is ours, which meets our needs and desires, restores us and gives us a sense of who we are. Work, as fabrication, is just this act of world-building.

There is a strong conceptual distinction between work and labour; their etymology is quite separate. In European languages the words behave quite differently and the grounds for treating them as synonymous are weak. Very simply, while work is both verb and noun – the musical work (noun) is what is produced by the work (verb) of the composer – labour does furnish us with an equivalent noun form. I can say ‘the work must be on my desk in the morning’, but I cannot say ‘the labour must be on my desk by morning’. Labour does not seem to materialise and become an object. While cultural history is precisely that of great works – monuments, books, palaces, bridges, temples – what has *labour* ever left behind? Labour does not endure; it leaves no permanent record of itself. The labour that was required of rural subsistence communities at harvest time leaves no trace, while the working of the land by the plough, scarifies and shapes. The labour that toiled to gather building stones is invisible; but the work of the craftsmen that fashioned and fabricated a wall from those materials, that marks terrain, that protects property, endures for centuries. But work, to a large extent, depends upon and is preceded by labour, an unskilled, repetitive accumulation of resources and materials, work that is only fit for animals, slaves or lower orders, or machines. Labour does not endure, but rather is only ever destined to be repeated. It is characterised by a remorseless and yet invisible circularity. And in cultures that value property and therefore durability and objecthood, labour and labouring is held only in contempt. Our

work becomes laborious when we find it returning to the beginning (like the start of an academic year). We sweep the path clear of leaves only to have to repeat the task the next day, and the next year and every year afterwards.

In all European languages the words for labour connote trouble and pain. The English word 'travail', meaning laborious effort, comes from the old French word *trepalium*, meaning an instrument of torture. And we are ourselves caught inside these endless cycles: our body continually demands food, it must be washed and clothed and there is nothing that can be done about it. To be in the world, even one we made ourselves, requires us to labour.

If labour is circular, work directed towards goals, commodities and world-making, human action, however, has a quite different structure. Action has two parts: the deed and the ramifications. To act has a specific sense in Arendt, it means to begin, to initiate. In acting I set something in motion. And then what has begun must be carried through but with *no view of its end*. Perhaps the action is carried through by an instigator; perhaps it is carried through by others, but whatever the case, there is a context which must suffer (bear, sustain) the action. Every situation, every social body, trembles under the impact of an action. And every action ramifies in countless directions and permeates any number of further situations. An action is therefore also potentially boundless. If it is boundless then in acting, the agent cannot predict where the action will end or if, as it propagates, the action will yield the good or the bad. The crucial and devastating point is this: the results of action are unknown and unknowable by the agents. An action then is not calculable, it cannot be judged. The agent always confronts the unknown.

As becomes clear in the development of these ideas below, these three aspects of the active life matter hugely to art. What use has art for the laborious? In one sense, very little. Traditional art is orientated exclusively towards the production of durable objects of great status. The durability of the work of art is emblematic of their being. Rather ironically, Shakespeare's sonnets continually pit the endurance of the poem itself against the mortality of the poetic subject: while the beloved might grow old and die, the poem is ageless. Sonnet 18 is typical; it ends: *So long as men can breathe or eyes can see/So long lives this, and this gives life to thee*. The wager could not be more bold: Shakespeare's sonnet will last as long as humankind.

But labour need not be regarded as negative. If, as it did under modernity, artists became sensitive to the commodification of works, the works began to dematerialise. Artworks became sets of instructions which initiated laborious tasks (I am thinking here of Sol LeWitt's wall drawings), or landscape works which were both ephemeral and explicit in their reliance on repetitive labour (i.e. Richard Long and his line 'sculptures' made by the traces left by walking). While labour, from the standpoint of work, might seem unworthy or base, or a trouble or a torture, producing nothing of itself and invisible to history, this might very well be a distortion, the conclusion of a consciousness that has screened itself from the ordinary processes of life; that misrecognises them, that finds security – that is happiness – in the durability of objects rather than a permanence of change; that finds its happiness in things rather than in a sense of continuity with the past or with others. Property, endurance and exchangeability produce a false consciousness which cannot but value that which endures over that which perishes as it is consumed.

Clearly some aspects of aesthetic production require labour (instruments must be practiced, techniques must be learnt and sustained through diligent repetition, canvasses must be prepared, novels must be copied and bound), and aesthetic production requires work (plans must be executed, aesthetic works must be made to stand up and endure), but such work must somehow maintain itself within freedom, not within a more or less mundane logic of means and ends, toil and remuneration. There has to be 'something else', another ingredient, a quality that eludes both labour and work. Traditionally this element has been called 'inspiration', a divine spark that kick-starts the whole process. But, in the remainder of this chapter, I will try to argue that this element can be called *action* and it is here that the traditional discourses of affect and inspiration can be revisited and redescribed.

So, while it is easy to see that artists labour and work, do they act? Composition can seem laborious when we are moving in circles, when there is no end in sight, when we have toiled all day and produced nothing. Composition seems like work when the objective is clear (when we have a plan that we realistically expect to complete), it feels like work when we know what we are doing and why. Much of music can be taught and learnt, communicated and shared. Such knowledge would concern how certain aesthetic ends (forms, characters, effects),

qualified by regulative criteria (such as unity, harmony, coherence, expressiveness, playability, balance, etc.) could actually be achieved through the proper deployment and manipulation of material means. Getting all this right, being reasonable and explicit in one's activity, allows it to become work and share in the genuine satisfaction that comes from 'world-making'. (And, speaking for myself, as someone who is becoming increasingly conservative in a compositional sense, it is a source of great frustration that the workly aspects of composition are so undervalued.)

However, action is incalculable: action takes place inside a sense of unknowing. But not all unknowns are alike. Hamlet's 'undiscovered country', that is, death, is of a quite different order to not knowing a phone number. There is a potential fallacy here. Action takes place inside a sense of unknowing, but does 'not knowing' produce action? It is a mistake – imprudent – to keep oneself in ignorance, to keep oneself in the dark when there is knowledge to be had, just so that what one does looks and feels like action. 'Go for it' and 'just do it' are the slogans for late capitalist assertiveness in the face of banal imponderables. In acting we appear brave, decisive, combative; we move forwards and change our lives. Deliberation is not given a chance. We are not allowed to be rational. Action now becomes foolhardiness.

It is arguable that creative processes involve large amounts of decision making. 'Where do I begin?' 'Is what I have good enough?' 'Is that character convincing?' 'Should I stop the composition now, or does it need more work?' All of these questions force the artist to make a decision. Yes or no? Let us consider the decision. The concept of decision pertains to a situation whereby the task of producing alternatives and prioritising them has come to an end and yet there remains more than one possible course of action, all of which are equally preferable or equally unattractive. If one course of action is obviously the best, there is no decision to be made, one knows what to do. But in a situation whereby our deliberations do not grant us this insight, something must be done, but what? What is for the best? What might be done next is, strictly speaking, incalculable because all my efforts to weigh the pros and cons of my options have produced only a stalemate. What must be done is action; I must take a step, a leap into the dark.

In musical composition, for example, insufficient technique leaves too much to be decided; or, what is worse, the decision making is

only apparent because, while there do exist criteria which could properly inform deliberation, they are either not known or not deployed. Should I worry about which chord follows every other chord? Shall I never know what instruments are capable of? Anxiety, which stems from the pervasive sense of being ill-equipped, is generally the result. Anecdotally, such anxiety, which drains exorbitant amounts of psychic and intellectual energy, is often mistaken for 'creative temperament'. While we scream and shout and throw manuscript paper around we feel active, we can believe ourselves heroes. While we don't know what we are doing, we can maintain ourselves in the false belief that we are acting. The composer, in a sense, is suspicious of reasoning about his or her work for the simple reason that it might thereby be stripped of the quality of action.

An inspiration has absolutely that character of an inception, a beginning, a making possible. As was absolutely routine of artists and composers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Schoenberg's own accounts of his compositional experience relied heavily on the moment of inspiration, a moment that is typically accompanied by, or is caused by, strong affective states of elation. Artists have an interest in making themselves 'ready' for what is to be given to the artist – the *inspiration*, whether it is thought to come spontaneously from 'beyond', as a Muse, a god, or Nature; or from 'within', memory, inner nature, the subconscious.

Affective states seem to come in two flavours: reverie and intoxication, and either can be supposed to be felicitous to creative endeavour. What is more, artists and creators have a particular proclivity for succumbing to, eloquently occupying, such states. Quietness, stillness, contemplation and solitude are themes common of early Romantic poetry, but such poems also reflect, sincerely, the mood of the poets themselves. The poem, *given* in solitude, is dignified by the bearing that conditions its coming into being, and the poem brings with it its own originating context as theme, tone and subject matter. Similarly, in nineteenth-century music, the *Träumerei*, the reverie, while being a characteristic form in its own right, is also a theory – or a story – of what brings art into being in the first place. It is also, of itself, an object of reverie: listening and performance take place inside and recapture a poetic reverie.² Poetry (now a general concept betokening all cogent aesthetic endeavour) permits poetic states of being – characterised by high sensitivity and receptiveness – to circulate. And

poetry conditions souls, making them susceptible to the solicitations of the verities, of nature and of love. The Wordsworthian formula, recapitulated in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, encapsulates this perfectly: 'I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.' Aesthetic works stand before us as masterly, formally convincing and sincere, recollections of actual emotion, or actual lived experience.

Contemplative states reside on a continuum with their opposites: the dance, laughter, drunkenness and, at one extreme, reappear as pharmacological stupefaction. Where would the history of later nineteenth century art be without wine and opium? Where would post-1950 popular music be without LSD and Ecstasy? Because of the indulgent, excessive, hysterical and obsessive traits that art seems to tolerate, it can never quite rid itself of the daemonic. The formidable abilities of musical virtuosi – Paganini and Robert Johnson are the obvious examples – were attributed to super-human, *demonic* influence. It was Nietzsche, still entirely caught in the nineteenth-century ideology of creativity and physiology, who took this line of thinking to its most decadent extreme in the *Will to Power as Art*. For Nietzsche, aesthetic production was basically a pathological process, a great excrescence of those endowed with a powerful will.

By analogy, it is easy to see that both contemplative states and intoxication comport with the actional because both distance themselves from the laborious and the worked. Neither are any effort; neither can be sustained for long periods – one falls into such states – and both stand as a considerable remove from planning and calculation. But taking action could itself be thought of as a delirium, an intoxication of sorts, a flight beyond reason. The 'affective' stories attempt to account for aspects of creative experience that seem to fall outside the control of the artist and can lead to a picture of creativity as sudden, chaotic, impulsive and unmanageable. But action and the decision also share these characteristics. Intoxication enables us to act because the forces that would otherwise hold us back have been neutralised.

It is exactly this story that high modernism rejects out of hand. It declares its verdict on inspiration and the arrogant pronouncements of Genius rather abruptly, applying a ban to such ludicrous notions and turning its attention to the purely technical dimension of art. Now the story is one of brute calculation over whim and fancy. It deliberately

impoverished sensibility, producing brash, brutal and unsentimental art. Mechanistic, systemic or process art replaced the effusive, indulgent masterpieces of the nineteenth century. The genetic story here might be one of mimetically adapting aesthetic production to the paradigm of rationalised, industrial production. Modernism valorises the ferocious productivity of the machine over delicate musings of the soul. But modernism still had its heroic, actional, aspects: the avant-garde after all were committed to aesthetic and social transformation, they flew in the face of public taste and mores.

The composer Arnold Schoenberg had long agonised about the apparent lack of connection between two of the themes of his *Kammersymphonie* op. 9. Many years after its composition he relates his disquiet and eventually triumph:

Directed only by my sense of form and the stream of ideas, I had not asked such questions while composing; but, as usual with me, doubts arose as soon as I had finished. They went so far that I had already raised the sword for the kill, taken the red pencil of the censor to cross out the theme b [the second theme]. Fortunately, I stood by my inspiration and ignored these mental tortures. About twenty years later I saw the true relationship. It is of such a complicated nature that I doubt whether any composer would have cared deliberately to construct a theme in this way; but our subconscious does it involuntarily. (Schoenberg 1975: 222–3)

In another essay, referring to the same epiphany, he writes:

This is also the place to speak of the miraculous contributions of the subconscious. I am convinced that in the works of the great masters many miracles can be discovered, the extreme profundity and prophetic foresight of which seem superhuman. In all modesty, I will quote here one example from the *Kammersymphonie* ... solely in order to illustrate the power behind the human mind, which produces miracles for which we do not deserve credit. In this example is unveiled the hidden relationship between two main themes. It is based on the appearance of steps of the melody, which, in the second theme, move miraculously in the opposite direction ... If there are composers capable of inventing themes on the basis of such a remote relationship, I am not one of them. (Schoenberg 1975: 85)

We might quibble over whether or not the themes are indeed connected, or over the means by which such an observation could be substantiated, or doubt that a connection so complicated could even be heard. But let us listen rather to the type of story that is being told

here. For Schoenberg, there *is* a connection between the themes, it *matters* that there is a connection between the themes, and it matters how this connection came to be there at all. It is decisive that this connection was not planned or consciously intended by the composer. While Schoenberg, being a consummate craftsman, would not shrink from laying claim to the technical achievement were it his, he does not. Rather, his story draws on a difficult mix of psychology and theism; it is the miraculous contribution of the subconscious and yet also evidence of a gift from the ‘Almighty’, or the ‘Supreme Commander’, which is then left to the discipline of the artist and insight of the music analyst to make good. To the twenty-first-century ear such a story may strike one as quaint. But that is hardly the point. In trying to explain how this music came about, Schoenberg has entangled the ‘fact’ of these connected themes with miracles and the gift of inspiration. And what now? Can any evaluation of the *Kammersymphonie* or any evaluation of the composer ever really discount the compositional miracle that sits at its heart?

In the light of what has been presented so far, this story of Schoenberg’s could be read in another way. Schoenberg’s mental ‘torture’ signals the presence of a decision at the heart of this composition. That the second theme should be as it is, that it should be left in place, even in the absence of a rationale, was a decision. Was it the right decision? Decades elapsed before the agony was alleviated and a ‘reason’ was uncovered. The principle by which they could be connected was the reason. In retrospect, their connectedness justifies the decision, which can now change its status to that of an inspiration. Without demonstration of connectedness, Schoenberg’s decision is simply an act of will that forced two things into a relationship. What one respects and understands here is that an artist had to make the initial decision in the absence of justification and without knowing whether or not his decision was the right one. This moment deserves the name of *action*.

Taking a sceptical stance, it is possible – even preferable – to say that the two themes connected only by chance. Could the genetic story here be that Schoenberg got *lucky*? Schoenberg, committed as he was to musical logic, would have no time for the arbitrary. But there is no shame in this, surely? No artist would ever renounce serendipity, but need one go so far as to say that a happy accident is a sanction from God? Let us pursue this question in a more extreme

context. The picture of literary creation being roughly analogous to a room full of typewriter-wielding monkeys has entered the popular unconscious via the realm of probabilistic mathematics, where it is known as the ‘infinite monkey theorem’. The conjecture is that if one left sufficient monkeys and typewriters alone for long enough, the complete works of Shakespeare (or some other significant body of work) might be produced ‘accidentally’. In fact, the mathematics tells us the exact opposite. To all intents and purposes, the probability of *Hamlet* being ‘written’ entirely by accident is zero. When computer simulations began, rather ironically, to test the theorem (with the monkeys being replaced by hundreds of random number generators), small fragments of Shakespeare did actually materialise. An article in the *Times Literary Supplement* (2007: 36) reports that: ‘The Monkey Shakespeare Simulator, in existence since 2003 with a hundred monkeys typing at a vastly accelerated speed, has produced just nineteen letters from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* after 42,162,500,000 billion billion monkey years: “Valentine. Cease to”. A separate simulation produced a fragment from the second part of *Henry VI*: “RUMOUR, open your ears.”’

While the ‘infinite monkey theorem’ teaches us a great deal about the dangers inherent in sloppy reasoning with regard to probabilities, complex tasks, very large versus infinite numbers, our concern here is not with the mathematics. Nor is it with the demonstration that complex tasks, like the writing of masterpieces, are not best accomplished by blind, arbitrary mechanisms. But, rather, what is the nature of the story one can tell with regard to such strange fragments of text? In a sense, something truly remarkable was ‘created’ here. Discovered amidst trillions upon trillions of lines of random textual screech, such phrases are even more unlikely and more deserving of the status of the miraculous than anything Schoenberg could have produced. But who or what is responsible for these fragments of poetry? What is their origin? They seem oddly orphaned, bereft; almost ghostly. What they lack is a progenitor. The place of origin stands empty, with no higher cause at work. In effect, a new piece of poetry was made here. It is superficially the same as a piece of Shakespearean drama, but the genetic story behind the production matters hugely.

The infinite monkey theorem is only an extreme case of a very real and very productive tradition of aleatoric aesthetic processes, processes which are designed to break the link between the intentions

of the artist and the resultant work. William Burroughs' 'cut-up' technique, John Cage's use of chance-based I Ching methods, the Surrealists and Dadaists, David Bowie and Thom Yorke of the English band Radiohead, have all deployed aleatoric techniques to produce material. In every case, there is a revaluing of the product by process. Popular culture might embrace cut-up technique so as to make rhetorical and stylistic liaisons with high modernist culture and shore-up avant-gardist pretensions. Dadaists use chance as a protest against meaning, the Surrealists use it to open up unconscious association, de-repress desire and fantasy. The aleatorical does not foreclose genetic storytelling, it opens up a vast array of further possibilities and complications.

Aesthetic creation, if it contains a moment of action, cannot be rid of a certain darkness. Action begins but cannot control ramification. But there is an exhilaration to beginning because, in a sense, the action has no past; it is not entangled in chains of consequences and obligation. These come later. Even in writing, as one begins a sentence, there is a certain excitement at what might unfold. Aphoristic writing is shot through with that thrill of beginning, the freshness and impetus of starting out. But how soon we can feel caught by past decisions. How can we go back on an action? It is too late for that. And immediately the consequences of our actions burden us. The feeling can drive us to madness. But as Arendt (1998: 236) observes, there is a way out: 'The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility – of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing – is the faculty of forgiving.' If one is forgiven, one is released from the debt of the past and the deeds which haunt us. Forgiving is an act for the reasons already established: it is unconditional, it makes no bargain with the future, and it allows us to begin again.

Compositional action is concentrated at the beginning and forming sustains, suffers that beginning. Forming, like life, is irreversible. It must go on. The only actions that can adjust the remorselessness of forming are forgetting and forgiving (the return of the aria theme at the end of Beethoven's op. 111 sounds not like a forgetting of what went before, but a forgiving).

One last observation: contemporary technology has ruined aesthetic practice in one main respect. It allows us to be indecisive. What single thing would improve the quality of writing? Remove the delete

key on a word processor. Deletion means that writing is not frightening enough. We can always retract what we say. We can act, delete, then pretend that it never happened and we stay in place. But when we write knowing that we cannot turn back, we write differently. We are gripped by a force of great moment.

Notes

- 1 The 'scare' quotes apply since the word 'creative' has become banalised into near ruin by both common parlance and informal theory.
- 2 There are countless stories relating the collaboration of dreams in composition: Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* came almost fully formed in an opium-induced slumber; Wagner dreamed of the resounding E flat chord that opens *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Perhaps the most emblematic legend within the psychology of creativity is that relating to the chemist Friedrich August Kekulé's dream – he succumbed to sleep on a Clapham omnibus and upon waking the mysterious molecular structure of benzene was presented to him. See A. Rothenberg (1995), 'Creative cognitive processes in Kekulé's discovery of the structure of the benzene molecule', *American Journal of Psychology*, 108(3): 419–38.

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